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William Sennett

COMMUNIST FUNCTIONARY AND CORPORATE EXECUTIVE

An Interview Conducted by
Marshall Windmiller
in 1981 and 1982

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WILLIAM SENNETT

July 1946

Although he is 70 years old, no one would think of speaking of Bill in the past tense. He is not the man who was. He is not even the man who is. He is the man who is always becoming. I mean becoming in all of its laudatory implications.

Bill is the rare person who can stand aside and look at himself and be completely honest about what he sees.

We served in the same unit as truck drivers for the Loyalists in the Spanish war against Fascism. Bill was our political commissar by appointment. Who appointed him and the other officers was not clear, and so their positions of authority were resented. So, before any real action took place, the drivers called a political meeting and voted to replace all the incumbent officers with others they felt more comfortable with.

Bill was a young man in his early twenties when this happened. Serious and dedicated, it was a great shock to him, as you can imagine to be deposed in this way. Here, from his oral history, "From Communist Functionary to Corporate Executive," is how he reviewed this shattering experience: "My own limitations stood in the way of my handling that job....I came to understand it in retrospect. I took things too literally and carried out commands without question. I obviously had picked up the kind of bureaucratic approach that was a negative side of the communist leadership. I brought it to Spain and conducted myself as a political leader in a very bureaucratic, dogmatic and pompous way. Obviously, I didn't endear myself to most of the men in the 2nd Squadron and, as a result, I was forced to resign my position." And here is the last line, "It was a very good thing for me."

These are the simple words of a man capable of self-evaluation and constructive thoughtfulness--the very formula for becoming, as opposed to just being.

In the Spanish War, he stayed with our unit to the very end in his diminished capacity as a truck driver--just as I was.

When we came home, he invited me to stay with him in Chicago where he had a flat. We were very poor. Poor is too grand a word--we weren't even rich enough to be called poor. He gave me a suit of clothes he said had become too tight for him. I put on the suit and went on my way back to California, his friend for life.

It is no wonder that all of you here who have known and worked with Bill through the years, and have observed him in his many capacities, have come from all over the country to celebrate the 70th birthday of Bill Sennett, my good friend. An inestimable man.

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FOREWORD BY THE INTERVIEWER

In the late 50s and early 60s, I was active in the California Democratic Council and was the copublisher of The liberal democrat, a little magazine aimed at the left wing of the Democratic party. The magazine ceased publication in 1964, its commitment to reformist electoral politics appearing to many as obsolete in a climate dominated by the radical political style of the emerging "new left."

A number of us associated with the magazine continued to be active in the antiwar movement and other good causes, but also began to get together regularly for purely social purposes.

A member of this circle brought Bill Sennett into the group in 1972, and that is when I first met him. We have become good friends over the years and I gradually learned about his activities in the Communist party and his service in the war against fascism in Spain.

I found Bill's story fascinating for two reasons. First, as a student of communism, I am always curious about the internal workings of Communist parties. Second, I was interested in why he left the party and how, after doing so, he was able to keep his basic leftist political values while at the same time becoming moderately wealthy as a business executive in the capitalist world.

Bill is not one of those ex-Communists who left the party, repudiating his earlier views and denouncing his former comrades. He was drawn into politics because of compassion for the poor and contempt for oppressors. He is still driven by those emotions and is still active on the left.

For several years I urged Bill to write his memoirs, but was never able to convince him that it was worthy of the time and effort. Then as an alternative, my wife, Myra, suggested an oral history, and Bill agreed.

The taping was done in fourteen two-hour sessions in my home in Alameda, California, beginning on July 31, 1981 and concluding on September 10, 1982. Bill was always well prepared with two copies of an outline of the period to be covered in each session. He had always done what he could to refresh his memory on names, events, and dates. Transcribing was performed by the Bancroft Library Oral History Office staff and edited by them and Bill. I was not involved in the editing process.

Clearly I was not a disinterested scholar in this enterprise. Bill is my friend, and I share most of his political views. But I am interested in the truth and I tried to discover it, perhaps sometimes to the pain and embarrassment of my friend. I think the result is an interesting story of an admirable life, and I am proud to have played a modest part in its telling.

Marshall Windmiller

Alameda, California
September 17, 1983

[Marshall Windmiller is Professor of International Relations at San Francisco State University and coauthor of Communism in India (University of California Press, 1959).]

EDITOR'S NOTE

An innovative approach to truck trailer leasing launched former Communist party official William Sennett into the higher echelons of the capitalist world. As general manager of Rentco and then president of Transport Pool, he built the business into a multimillion-dollar corporation headquartered in San Francisco with sixty-six branches nationwide and twenty-six in ten foreign countries (including business relationships in Israel and the Soviet Union).

This road to business achievement had an unlikely beginning in the Young Communist League in 1931 in Chicago. In that bitter Depression year, seventeen-year-old Bill Sennett, son of a poor Russian-Jewish barrelmaker, joined the Young Communist League to help "un-evict" unemployed workers and their families. For the next twenty-seven years, Sennett served as a self-described "functionary" in the Communist party until his resignation following the revelations of the Twentieth Party Congress of the Soviet Union.

The possibility of chronicling this remarkable journey was suggested to the Regional Oral History Office by Marshall Windmiller, professor of international relations at San Francisco State, radio commentator, and founder of The liberal democrat. Mr. Sennett, a Spanish Civil War veteran, already had contributed material on his war experiences in Spain to The Bancroft Library's growing Social Protest Collection. He agreed to be interviewed. Professor Windmiller offered to serve as interviewer pro bono publico, and Mr. Sennett secured funding for production costs.

The interviewing took place over a period of a year (July 1981-September 1982), with the interview outlines prepared by the interviewee and interviewer. As the interviews progressed, they conferred with the editor, who suggested some additional questions and supervised the transcribing process. Occasionally, Mr. Sennett's desire to be precise in his recollection and clear in his exposition diminished the spontaneous tone of the conversation. He customarily prepared for an interview by reading clippings and commentaries by others to refresh his recollection and sometimes spoke from notes made in advance of the interview. However, his commitment to candor as well as accuracy was in evidence in his thoughtful responses to Professor Windmiller's questions that probed subjects uncomfortable to recall.

After being transcribed by the Regional Oral History Office, the transcript was returned to Mr. Sennett for his review. He attended to his editing with what was evidently characteristic energy and dispatch. In the interests of clarification, he edited rather heavily, rewriting to refine the focus of his responses and adding material to fill out his spoken account. The resulting manuscript was then gone over by the editor for consistency, and turned over to Sam Middlebrooks for final typing on the

Office's new computer. Following a long period of shakedown and breakdown of the computer, the final manuscript was completed, indexed, and illustrative materials added. A wealth of photographs and other materials were made available by Mr. Sennett. Only some could be reproduced in this volume, and so Appendix A lists the additional materials, which Mr. Sennett has donated to The Bancroft Library.

The finished product is an absorbing story of a committed political activist, whose personal relationships and professional life were profoundly influenced by his humanitarian beliefs. William Sennett's unstinting approach to political work was applied to producing this oral history memoir—he did not spare himself. History will be well served.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons significant in the history of the West and the nation. The Office is under the administrative supervision of James D. Hart, Director of The Bancroft Library.

Julie Gordon Shearer
Editor

Willa Baum, Division Head
Regional Oral History Office

February 9, 1984
Regional Oral History Office
486 The Bancroft Library
University of California at Berkeley

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please print or write clearly)

Your full name WILLIAM SENNETT

Date of birth OCT. 6, 1914 Place of birth CHICAGO, ILL.

Father's full name DAVID SENNETT

Birthplace RUSSIA

Occupation BARREL MAKER

Mother's full name SARAH YAMPOLSKY

Birthplace RUSSIA

Occupation HOUSEWIFE

Where did you grow up ? CHICAGO, ILL.

Present community SAN FRANCISCO & TIBURON

Education 9th GRADE

Occupation(s) ORGANIZER, MACHINE HAND, SALESMAN, BUSINESS
EXECUTIVE

Special interests or activities SOCIAL & POLITICAL MATTERS, GIN
RUMMY & POKER, POOL,

I Early Life

[Interview 1: July 29, 1981]##

PARENTS' EMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

MW: This is an interview with William Sennett, the first session on July 29, 1981, and we're going to talk about his early life and childhood at home. Bill, I guess the way to start is to ask you about your parents.

Sennett: My folks were born in a small town in Russia. I'm not sure about the name of that town. It was near Kiev in the Russian Ukraine. They came from poor parents. My brother Charlie told me that he had once talked to my father about that period, and he learned that our antecedents were people who had actually been serfs in Russia. My grandfather (my father's father) had been a barrel-maker. My father also became a barrellmaker, following in his father's footsteps.

My father, whose name was David, fought in the Russo-Japanese War. His exact birth date is not known. He was born in 1883 and it was either--he wasn't sure--in March or April. He was drafted into the service in 1904 even though he was married and a child had already been born at that time. My mother, whose maiden name was Sarah Yampolsky, was also born in 1883. Her first-born, a girl, was accidentally suffocated in bed while sleeping together with my mother, who had rolled over on her.

##This symbol indicates that a tape or a tape segment has begun or ended. For a guide to the tapes see page 377.

Sennett: My father was a cavalryman. He apparently was discharged from the military service in 1905 before the end of the war. My brother Charlie was born while my father was still in the army, and Leo was born in Russia in 1907.

MW: So he was married while he was in the service?

Sennett: Yes, he was.

MW: Okay, then I guess the next big event in his life was coming to the United States, or was there something more important?

Sennett: No, I think that was it. He emigrated and, as was quite usual in those days, he left for the United States in 1908, leaving the rest of the family behind.

MW: Do you know why he emigrated?

Sennett: The usual thing, of course. Jews were discriminated against, and conditions in Russia were abominable. The family was very poor. There was very little work my father could get. It was very limited. My grandparents on both sides were poor, and a number of his friends were taking off to go to America. With the help of his sisters who were already in the country in Philadelphia, my father was able to get the money to make the journey possible.

MW: Would you call any of the motivation political or was it economic or because of discrimination against Jews? He wasn't politically active, in other words?

Sennett: Not that I know of, not at that time, although he seems to have been somewhat radical and he hated the czar. He was not an activist from a life of oppression and poverty.

MW: So then he was in the United States with two sisters here to receive him, in effect, and help him get started.

Sennett: In Philadelphia, three sisters who were already there.

MW: They had been here for quite a period of time?

Sennett: Yes. They also, of course, were born in Russia. I don't have any information as to what made it possible for them to get here.

MW: Were they pretty well established; that is, did they speak English and have jobs and were they able to take care of him until he could get a job?

Sennett: They were all married and had husbands. They were, as was usual, housewives and their husbands were working. One sister's husband, as I recall, was a shoemaker and had a little shoeshop in Philadelphia. They were at least gainfully employed.

MW: How long was it before he brought the family over?

Sennett: My mother and the rest of the family were brought to the country apparently in 1911. We haven't established the exact date.

MW: How did they get the money for passage?

Sennett: My father worked at his trade. He started in Philadelphia and then he moved to Chicago. He saved some money and borrowed the rest. He lived by himself and scrimped until he could manage to get enough money together to pay the expenses of my mother and two brothers.

MW: Do you know what kind of jobs he had?

Sennett: Primarily as a cooper. Barrelmaking was his trade, and he found work.

MW: In both of those cities?

Sennett: Apparently very little in Philadelphia but Chicago was a burgeoning industrial city with many cooperage shops at the time.

MW: So then the family was reunited in Philadelphia or in Chicago?

Sennett: In Chicago.

MW: Then he established a home there?

Sennett: That's right.

CHILDHOOD IN CHICAGO

MW: Was that where you were born?

Sennett: My brother Maury and I and my sister Betty, the three of us, were born in Chicago.

MW: So let's get straight now; how many children were there altogether?

Sennett: There were five children.

MW: Can you give us names in the order of their age?

Sennett: Yes, Charlie [Charles Gerald] was born in 1905, Leo Sennett in 1907. Maury [Maurice Sennett] was born in the United States in 1913.

MW: The third son was born in the U.S.?

Sennett: That's right, and I was born in 1914. My sister Betty Gertrude Sennett was born in 1919. All five are alive today.

MW: What do you remember about your earliest life in Chicago?

Sennett: My first remembrance of Chicago was of a fire in the house and my mother bundled me up and took me out of the house. That is only a fleeting memory and I am told that that's when I was about two or two and a half years old.

MW: Did that destroy the house?

Sennett: I don't know. Apparently not, but the house was on fire and we were all safely removed.

My second remembrance is that I was once taken to the hospital with my mother and my brother Maury. That happened to be the Chicago flu epidemic of 1918. It was a period, I have since learned, that hundreds of thousands of people all over the country died in what was a national flu epidemic. Obviously, the three of us--my mother, my brother, and I--contracted the flu and we were taken to the hospital.

MW: Was the whole family living together, you and your older brothers?

Sennett: Yes, but apparently the others didn't get the flu. We also had an uncle, Sam Skolnik, living with us at that time. He was married to one of my father's sisters, who was still in Russia. As with my father, he was working with the idea that he would earn enough money to bring his family--his wife and two children in Russia--to the United States. He lived with us in our home. He was what was known as a boarder and he stayed with the family until he died. He was never able to bring his family here because his wife had died. The circumstances of her death are not clear.

My uncle's two children in Russia were then raised by their grandparents and he was unable to bring them to this country.

LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

MW: What was the language that was spoken at home?

Sennett: Yiddish--Yiddish solely, at least until I entered grammar school--so that actually I did not speak English very well. We kids spoke Yiddish with our parents for all their lives.

MW: There was no Russian spoken?

Sennett: Yes, Russian was spoken, but not with the children. Russian was spoken by my parents when they didn't want the kids to know what was being said.

MW: What was the home language in Russia?

Sennett: The home language in Russia, where the family spoke together, was Yiddish. But Russian is the national language and my parents did speak Russian.

MW: But the language they were most comfortable with was Yiddish?

Sennett: Correct.

MW: So your first remembrance of communicating at home is in Yiddish?

Sennett: Yes.

MW: How did you feel about that? For example, as you began to grow older, was there a Yiddish-speaking community that you spoke Yiddish to or do you have some recollections of adapting to English?

Sennett: I have a very faint recollection of my use of English with children up to the age of five when I entered kindergarten. I must have used it with other children.

MW: You used Yiddish at home, but English with children.

Sennett: Yes.

MW: From the very beginning?

Sennett: From the very beginning I tried, but at a very early age I also lapsed into some Yiddish with other children who spoke Yiddish. I lived in a Jewish neighborhood, and obviously the adults, in the main at that time, communicated in Yiddish and that was the common language in use.

MW: Do you remember your parents making an effort to learn English?

Sennett: My father did to some extent but my mother apparently did not.

MW: How about your brothers?

Sennett: I don't remember. After all, they came to America as small children and they didn't speak English at all. However, they entered school at a normal age for children and they learned to speak the language, without an accent, as well as American-born children.

MW: When you recall now that whole period, is your recollection a period of a Yiddish-speaking period or an English-speaking period?

Sennett: Yiddish. And I was very much conscious of linguistic problems at one time. That was another thing that stands out in my childhood.

I was entered in kindergarten at the age of five when we lived on the West Side of Chicago. I started at the Holland School. On the first day of school my mother took me to the class. I apparently resisted going. I'm not sure whether I resisted because of my clothes, the way in which I was dressed, or my embarrassment because of the English language. It may have been a little bit of both.

MW: Clothes, meaning style or the lack of quality?

Sennett: The style; it was all hand-me-down. I was the youngest boy in the family and obviously I was wearing stuff that my older brothers had been wearing before me. I remember my mother was pushing me to go into the class. I hesitated and refused. I wanted to go home, and I guess I started to cry. She slapped me so hard that she bloodied my nose in school, and had to take me home that day. I don't remember whether my brother Leo or my mother took me back the next day. My mother and father were very physical in dealing with their children. They would slap us or cuff us with their hands, beat us with a broom or strap or a stick at the slightest infraction of their rules.

MW: Were you conscious of any linguistic inferiority in school in the kindergarten? In other words, not being able to understand what was being said?

Sennett: I don't remember. It must have been a quick transition, but I don't recall the circumstances. Apparently, things went smoothly very quickly once I was entered into kindergarten and I was forced to speak English. It seems to me that I must have picked it up without difficulty.

MW: You don't have any recollections of any linguistic conflict at home, of the family pressuring you to learn English, or pressuring you not to speak English or whatever?

Sennett: No, I had to communicate continuously in Yiddish at home. And mother was illiterate. She was illiterate in all languages. she did not know how to read or write in Russian or in Yiddish and obviously, she didn't know English. As I grew older, my brothers and I worked with her to try to get her to sign her name, because she used to just make an "X."

COPING WITH POVERTY AND PARENTAL DISCIPLINE

MW: Did you have any sense of poverty in that period? Were you poor?

Sennett: We were poor, but we were poor working class in the sense that my father worked and had an income, and we were never at the point of starvation. Although one time I remember, vaguely, that he was out on strike. There was no income and he borrowed money in order to make ends meet. But in the main, my father had work. He worked even during the Depression, when a lot of people did not have jobs. However, his income was meager, very low, and as a result, we always felt a lack of what we considered proper clothing or at least some decent-looking clothing. It was all hand-me-downs in my mind. But we didn't starve.

MW: Was this a happy period? Did you feel that this was a happy family?

Sennett: No, I think I always looked upon it as a very unhappy family. Actually, [in] my family, every one of the children ran away from home, all five, at different stages in their lives. It was based primarily on the fact that there was a feeling of, let's say, the lack of demonstrable affection and love; not that it didn't exist, because as we grew older I think we found that our parents just did not understand how to deal with us. My father was a pretty rough kind of physical man who believed in the rules that he set, and if you didn't conform, you were punished physically.

My mother was a little less rough, but on the other hand, my father decided what the ground rules were, and my mother carried them out. She, too, dealt with us physically as well. My parents didn't know how to show affection and love, and we children apparently couldn't cope with that too well until we grew older.

MW: By present standards, would you say that in your family there was, in fact, child abuse?

Sennett: I wouldn't call it child abuse. None of us was ever really hurt.

MW: Although your mother gave you a bloody nose at school?

Sennett: Well, that was the kind of hurt I got in some fights that I had with kids, too, but my mother was sorry the instant she did it. In other words, there was no follow-up or prolonged beatings. She would try to stanch the flow of blood, and then she would act as though she was sorry even though she didn't say it.

MW: But you recall as a very small child having a sense of being quite unhappy.

Sennett: Oh, yes. I recall also feeling very uneasy if I did something which was considered wrong during the day as a child, because my mother would threaten me with my father. We didn't mind getting cuffed around a little by mother, but we all feared my father who really made it hurt.

MW: Do you recall any happy periods during that time, anything that you did as a family that was really a lot of fun? Did you go to picnics?

Sennett: No. I recall only once going to the beach together, and we lived in Chicago, which has one of the finest systems of beaches around Lake Michigan that one could find. I never learned to swim as a child because we did not go to the beach, and in the schools I attended there were usually no swimming pools where one could learn. I don't ever remember going on any kind of vacation with them, even though they once sent my brother Maury and me to a camp. I apparently was either ten or eleven years old. It turned out, I learned only later, that it was a radical camp. It was being run by the Socialist Workmen's Circle. I spent two very happy weeks at that camp, even though I came home with a head full of lice.

MW: Do you think that any of this radicalism rubbed off on you then at an early age; that is, can you trace your own radical feelings back to your father's views?

Sennett: It well might have, but I didn't feel it because I never really learned that my father had socialist or communist convictions until after I had joined the communist movement myself. He didn't put me or bring me into the radical movement. But apparently there was something that may have rubbed off by osmosis.

MW: What about religion? Do you have any recollection of religious training or going to a temple or anything like that?

Sennett: No, my father was an atheist. My mother attempted to be religious. I say that because she really wasn't a member of the temple, although she went to services occasionally, and my uncle who lived with us went to services occasionally--only during holidays. My father used to make fun of my mother, who would, on Fridays, do the traditional candle praying ceremony, and that's about the extent of it, although she did at times, as on Passover, have the traditional separate dishes. But the house was not a kosher house. There were not the prohibitions in terms of "you can't eat meat with milk." But since my father continuously broke those traditions in the household, we apparently were able to do the same.

MW: Were you bar mitzvahed?

Sennett: No, I went to a Yiddish school, which is, of course, another indication of my father's ideas. Perhaps my mother would have liked to have us go to Hebrew school, but we went to the Workmen's Circle Yiddish School. That is where I learned to read and write in Yiddish.

MW: That was after school, after your regular public school?

Sennett: That is correct.

MW: So you had a lot of schooling then as a very young kid. You got oriented toward learning.

Sennett: In that sense, yes, after school in Yiddish.

MW: Your father was a working man. What was his attitude toward learning and education?

Sennett: Not very healthy when it came to his own children. But it was contradictory as he had a healthy respect for educated people. And he did want us to get absorbed in the Yiddish language and in Yiddish culture. I can recall discussions on evolution early on from the Yiddish school rather than the public school. I don't remember much of other subject matter but, obviously, some of the readings and discussions had to do with the philosophy of socialism, the brotherhood and equality of man, the oppression of the poor by the rich. And that probably rubbed off on me to some extent.

MW: Who ran away from home first?

Sennett: My brother, Charlie. By the way, our real name is Sneseitzky. Now you can see why our name was changed! It's pretty difficult to spell.

MW: Is that a Polish name?

Sennett: It is not exactly a Jewish name. It's closer to Polish. Again, the amalgam of Polish and other nationalities or languages with Yiddish, that was our name, which could indicate that some of our ancestors came from Poland, as well. My oldest brother's name is now Charles Gerald. He changed his name entirely when he ran away from home. His real name was Sol, not Charles. So it was Sol Snesezky. As Sol, he ran away from home for the first time when he was fifteen.

MW: And you were how old?

Sennett: I'm ten years younger; I was five. I don't have any recollection of that time. We had not yet moved to Gary, Indiana. The first time Charlie ran away from home, he did that in Chicago. He joined the navy. Obviously, when he joined the navy, he was not yet of age and needed parental permission. Since he couldn't get it, he lied about his age, changed his name and was able to get into the service. But apparently, still being a child in a sense, he was unsure of himself, frightened and insecure. He then called upon my father to get him out of the navy on the grounds that he was under age.

RUNNING AWAY FROM HOME

Sennett: Shortly thereafter, the family moved to Gary, Indiana, and Charlie went to work in the steel mills. He was unhappy with his work and his life and, I assume, with the family, and he ran away from home a second time. This time he was seventeen, and he joined the army, a peacetime army. He was sent to the Hawaiian Islands and was based in Schofield Barracks. That's the place that was bombed at Pearl Harbor. He served there for three years.

MW: Do you have any recollection of either of these runaways?

Sennett: No, I don't. All I knew is that I was conscious of the fact that he was not at home. I didn't know the circumstances.

MW: Then who ran away next?

Sennett: The next person to run away from home was my brother Leo. I ran away from home at age fifteen the first time. By then, I had already quit school.

MW: How far had you gotten in school?

Sennett: I had three months of two high schools. I had gone to eight grammar schools before I graduated, which indicates that the family moved around quite a bit, and that I was quite unhappy and restless and wanted to make changes quite frequently.

MW: Was this in Gary, Indiana?

Sennett: No, we lived in Chicago until apparently 1920 or '21 and then we lived in Gary, Indiana, for three years. My father quit his job and tried to become a businessman by opening up a grocery store. He had one store that failed and then opened another store and that failed too, so we moved back to Chicago.

MW: Since you said the first time, you weren't away very long then?

Sennett: No, the first time I ran away from home I was only away for about three weeks. I was frightened, I guess. I went as far as Bowling Green, Kentucky, because I had saved up only a limited amount of money to pay bus fare. This was before I had the gumption to hitchhike. Then I got in touch with my father's uncle, because I was afraid to talk to my father, and I told him that I wanted to go back home, and he said he would intercede for me. I told him that I wanted him to get my father's promise that I wouldn't get a beating. He convinced my father and my mother not to lay their hands on me.

MW: So you went back?

Sennett: Yes.

MW: How long was it before you ran away again?

Sennett: Then I ran away from home when I was sixteen.

MW: That was about a year later? ##

Sennett: About a year later. When I was working, I withheld money from my mother when I could. The justification in my own mind was the fact that I was bringing in money to the household and I felt I was not getting my share. I, obviously, was happier about going to work, because I looked forward to that to give me a certain degree of independence. I had become friends with a group of kids who, in the main, came from middle class parents, and most of them were still going to school. Even though I was working, and working full time, they always had more money to spend than I did. There were certain things that the gang did together that I couldn't afford even though I was working. The only way I could participate was to get some more money back from my earnings one way or another. When I worked for the Chicago Title and Trust Company as an office boy, and then became a junior clerk, I gave

Sennett: all my money to my mother but not voluntarily. That was the way things were. She, in turn, would make my lunch and give me an allowance daily--just enough for car fare, and to buy a bottle of milk to go with the lunch. On Saturday I would get fifty cents for spending money.

The money matter stirred ideas of leaving home. I started saving money by not telling my mother about a raise that I got. The raise was only two dollars a week, but I saved that money and was able to use it for my trip to Bowling Green, Kentucky.

I was no longer working for the Chicago Title and Trust when I ran away the second time. I had worked in a print shop as an apprentice and I still wasn't happy about my home life, and I wasn't sure I wanted to be a printer. My father got me the job through some friend. Again, my family was getting all my earnings and I had no control over it. I was unable to save any money from my printing job because my employer paid by check.

I left home this time with about \$15.00 in my pocket. I started hitchhiking and ended up by riding the freight trains most of the way to California.

MW: What was your age?

Sennett: I was sixteen.

MW: You had just a little bit of high school.

Sennett: Three months.

MW: Why did you want to go to California? What did you expect to find?

Sennett: California was a romantic place for me when I was a kid, I guess. Like a lot of kids, I used to read stories about the West, and I wanted to ride horses, and I felt that California would be a nice place to go. It was a romantic new world. Obviously, I also wanted to get away badly enough so that I could handle my own money and be on my own.

MW: You rode the rails? You came out on the train?

Sennett: I rode freight trains and passenger trains. I learned to ride what was called the blinds. In back of the tender there was a space where there was a step on a passenger train. If you wanted to get somewhere in a hurry, you would bypass the freight trains. For short runs, I was taught how to jump on a passenger train while it was just taking off. It just had to get past the

Sennett: station, and then you could jump on. You had to do this while it was in motion, and you could stand up in the section back of the tender. You could make good time for as long as you could take it. You had to stay awake and be alert; you couldn't let go, which was quite different from a freight train.

MW: The tender was what they also used to call the coal car, wasn't it?

Sennett: Yes, the coal car.

MW: Who taught you all this?

Sennett: Some other people who were bumming around like I was.

MW: Does that mean that you stayed in what were called hobo towns and places like that?

Sennett: Sure.

MW: Were there people your age? You were only sixteen.

Sennett: No, I was the youngest one there. They called me "the kid" and that's why I was being given "lessons" of all kinds about how to get food and how to jump on trains and how to find out where they were going, how to avoid railroad detectives, et cetera.

MW: What year was this, do you remember?

Sennett: This was 1930.

MW: So this was in the middle of the Depression.

Sennett: That's right, and most of the men were not ordinary hoboes. They were really men who were unemployed and were moving on to try to find work anywhere out West.

MW: Was there a lot of camaraderie or was it dog-eat-dog? Did you have to watch out to prevent your own money being stolen by other hoboes and that sort of thing, or were there good feelings?

Sennett: Most of them seemed to be very cooperative, and I would say there was really a buddy system that developed among some of the men. There was always a sneak thief in that group, but they usually shared whatever they got. We used to go out begging for food, and then we'd end up in what was called the jungle, and whoever was around was able to partake of whatever food was brought together.

MW: So it was a sharing kind of experience.

Sennett: It certainly was.

MW: I wonder if any of that had any subsequent effect on your world view and your politics?

Sennett: I think it did. I remember, in fact, thinking that if people stuck together, they could get certain things done their way. I remember that we were in Texas one day and a "bull" (the railroad detective) chased us off of a train and away from the railroad yard. This one detective herded up a whole bunch of us with a club and a gun. There probably were twenty-five of us and here we were running from one man. It's true he had a gun and he shot it in the air, but nevertheless he put his gun back in his holster. I talked to some of our group later and I asked, "Why are twenty-five people running from one man? Why don't we swarm over him and beat him up? If we stood together, we could stop him." We began a discussion about sticking together and being able to do things as a group.

Some of the men, of course began to talk about the work that they were looking for, and mentioned that they had been in unions. They recalled that their unions had made it possible to get better wages and working conditions by demanding it as a group and sticking together.

MW: Did it ever happen that these hoboes did gang up? You never did have any showdown?

Sennett: No.

MW: You were in Texas, so did you go to California via Texas?

Sennett: The southern route, Texas, yes--Texas and Arizona.

MW: Where did you finally end up in California?

Sennett: Los Angeles.

MW: What did you do there?

Sennett: My father had a cousin there who was a tailor. His name was Jake Nemoy and he made tailor-made clothes in his shop in Inglewood, California. I went to see him and his family. In the meantime, my brother, Leo, who was older than I, had run away from home before me and ended up in Venice, California. He already had become a barker working at games with carnivals on the road. He was working on the Venice boardwalk at that time. Leo is about seven years older than I. He lived in Venice with some other

Sennett: concessionaires. I lived in Inglewood, California with the Jacob Nemoy family. They had three children. Two of them were close to my age, and we became friends.

"Uncle" Jake got me a job with the local newspaper called the Inglewood Daily News as a printing apprentice. Actually, I took care of job printing. I had learned a little in the print shop I had worked at previously. I had to set up type for business cards and envelopes and run them off on a Gordon Press, which was a hand-fed machine. I was very happy under those circumstances working there, but it didn't last very long because of the Depression. I was fired and Uncle Jake said that my boss on the newspaper, the publisher, indicated that he had to hire another young man because he was the son of one of the larger advertisers in Inglewood and "you had to do your customers a favor to hold onto business."

So I was fired after about three months and I went to Venice to stay with my brother Leo for a little while. But business was bad on the Venice boardwalk and Leo wasn't doing very well. He was planning to hit the road, so he suggested that it was best that I go back to Chicago. By that time, he was in communication with my mother and father. I had started to write them, too. He got an agreement from them, as did Jake Nemoy, that they would welcome me back without any recriminations.

MW: You were about seventeen by then?

Sennett: I was not quite seventeen yet. I was only in California for about four months all told.

MW: Why did you go back rather than look for another job in California?

Sennett: I did look; I wasn't successful. I had no trade, and it was pretty difficult. There were grown men supporting families willing to work for the wages that I would work for.

MW: Was this before the period when people from the Dust Bowl were beginning to come to California in search of jobs, agricultural jobs, and one thing and another?

Sennett: Yes, it was before that period. This was 1930.

MW: You didn't know anything about agricultural jobs?

Sennett: No, I didn't; I would have taken almost any job.

MW: You saw yourself primarily, I guess, as a city person and going out into the country didn't make any sense.

Sennett: No one ever suggested that to me, and I didn't think of it.

MW: So the idea of going home was then simply that there was a roof over your head and something to eat, right?

Sennett: Yes. And I was anxious to see some of my friends.

MW: Was that really the only reason? You didn't necessarily expect to find a job in Chicago either, or did you think you would?

Sennett: Well, I thought I might because my father had gotten me a couple of jobs in the past from a friend or some relative; that's about the only way one could expect to get a job easily in those days. I didn't think in terms of what I would do, but obviously I felt I couldn't stay on and sponge on my relatives in California, that I would just as well go home.

MW: So when you went home, what kind of welcome did you receive?

Sennett: Well, I wasn't beaten up, so that to me was a good welcome. I don't recall any great affectionate welcoming party of any kind.

MW: What happened then? Did you get a job or did you go back to school?

Sennett: I went home, and then I did get a job. My father had a friend who was a driver for a large bakery. I was put to work cleaning bakery pots, pans, and other utensils.

MW: Was this the same kind of arrangement as previously, namely the whole paycheck was turned over to your mother?

Sennett: Oh, absolutely.

MW: So it was right back to square one?

Sennett: That's it. That's why I didn't stay with my folks much longer.

MW: How long did you stay?

Sennett: Probably not more than a year. In 1932, I eventually entered into an early marriage, which made it possible for me to leave home for good.

CHICAGO'S WEST SIDE BASEMENT CLUBS

Sennett: Before I left home, the happiest part of my life as a child that I can recall is when I went to Bryant--that's the grammar school I graduated from. I met a group of boys there who lived in the neighborhood.

MW: We're back at what age?

Sennett: We're back to age thirteen. We lived in the west side at that time. I was able to relate to a group that was thinking of girls and sports. I had never really had an opportunity to get involved in sports as many kids did because of my work activities after school. We formed a club called the Dumb Johns. It was a group of all Jewish boys, ranging in age from thirteen to fifteen. We started hanging out on streetcorners together, and then we started dating girls. Sometimes we would go into non-Jewish neighborhoods to met non-Jewish girls. Many Jewish boys were taught that if you were going to play around with girls and go too far, you do it with a shiksa, but never with a Jew! [laughs] So obviously, we tried to practice that since we were experimenting with our sexual feelings.

At that time--this was in 1927-28--there was a phenomenon that developed in the Jewish neighborhoods, particularly on the west side, in which a group of young men would organize a basement club. They would rent a basement in a two-flat or a three-flat building. The basement was usually barren, but the group, which was organized as a social-athletic club, would fix up the basement. Nonmovable improvements belonged to the owner of the property. Secondhand furniture was brought into the clubs, sometimes donated by parents of the boys. This phenomenon, by the way, was written about by Meyer Levin, who wrote the book called The Old Bunch. It was all about the basement clubs of Chicago. I remember reading the book when I was in my twenties, and it all rang true with respect to the activities of club members. In the main, they were bringing girls down to the clubrooms for dancing and other social events, reading, smoking, playing cards and other games.

We had a softball team, and we got jerseys with our name, the Dumb Johns. This group was my gang and, of course, I tried to pattern my behavior along with that of the group. We also frequented an ice cream parlor on Chicago's west side, and I won the banana split eating championship. So we did a lot of the crazy and fun things that kids did in those days.

MW: Let me ask you one thing about that. Did kids in those days think it was a big deal to smoke or drink or was that avoided?

Sennett: No, it was avoided in the main. There were a couple of kids who smoked, but it wasn't widespread, and they were in the minority.

MW: In those days there were no drugs or anything like that?

Sennett: No drugs, no. In fact, we had heard of drugs, and we used to talk about dope fiends and drug fiends and it was in that negative sense. We all felt very concerned about having anything to do with people who were drug addicts. I don't remember ever meeting one. We thought there was something wrong with people who took drugs.

MW: So the big, risky thing for kids in those days was really sex then. It wasn't alcohol or tobacco.

Sennett: Oh, yes, that's right. but it wasn't that risky. Generally there was less actual sexual activity at our age, and pregnancies out of wedlock appeared to be infrequent.

II International Workers' Order--A New Movement and a New Life

MW: Let's go back now to where we left off, which was when you had come back from California and then got a new job, and you had to once again turn your money over to the family. So you were back living really in an oppressive family situation working at a job that you didn't particularly like. What happened then?

Sennett: I apparently didn't stay in that situation too long, because I was becoming involved with a new movement and a new life. I'm not sure exactly how it started, but I joined a group called the Youth Section of the International Workers' Order. By this time, I was beginning to drift away from most of the gang in the Dumb Johns. I joined the IWO because I met some people who indicated that it was a social as well as a fraternal organization, and we could have fun. I didn't think of it in terms of being a left-wing organization, and I met a whole new group of interesting people. We had political lectures and I found them informative and interesting. That's when I began to be exposed to the Communist movement.

MW: These were Marxist lectures?

Sennett: Yes, in they main the were.

MW: These were Communists who were giving these lectures?

Sennett: Primarily. The Communists were dominant in the leadership of the International Workers' Order.

MW: So can you give me any detail about that, what kind of lectures you got, and how seriously you took them. Did you start doing collateral reading and things like that, or was it primarily the social benefits of the club that kept you interested?

- Sennett: It was the social benefits of the club that got me involved, and it was the politics which made me much more interested. The lectures were based on those times. They had to do with the Depression and why it happened, they had to do with working people, unions, the war danger, et cetera, and I was exposed to a new world at that time.
- MW: These people giving the lectures, were they what you would call intellectuals or were they other workers? And were they good teachers? Did they know what they were talking about? Were you impressed with them intellectually?
- Sennett: I was impressed with most people who spoke or led the discussions at that time. I don't think they necessarily were professors or intellectuals. I think they were people who had been around the Communist movement and had learned a lot about economics, social movements, and politics.
- MW: Would you really call this the beginning then of your political education?
- Sennett: Yes, it was.
- MW: Can you give me any more detail about what you learned, and what kind of a world view began to take shape in your mind?
- Sennett: The main thing it did for me, was that I met a lot of people who were activists. I met members of the Young Communist League, and I met people who were members of an organization known as the Unemployed Councils. The Unemployed Councils were organized to respond to the needs and demands of people who were out of work.
- MW: Were these Communist party fronts, these Unemployed Councils?
- Sennett: They were called Communist fronts in those days by anti-Communists, but while Communists were among the key organizers and leaders, the overwhelming number of members were non-Communist.
- MW: At that period, did you have the image of Communists being social pariahs in any sense? The country had been through the Palmer raids and the red scares in earlier years. Communism was a dirty word in our society at that period, at least with a large segment of the society. Were you conscious of that?
- Sennett: No, I was not. When I joined, I was sort of "sheltered" in a sense. I did not have the feeling that the people that I began to know, the Communists, were pariahs or that they were looked down upon or that it could be dangerous to be a Communist. None of that entered my mind as they seemed to be gaining in strength and popularity.

MW: It is interesting that you used the term "shelter" because you really weren't sheltered in the usual sense of the term.

Sennett: I was sheltered from the outside world, you might say, because my new world was the Communist world, which was beginning to make sense to me.

MW: Either that or the rest of the world was sheltered and you were out in the cold and didn't know it. So you, in effect, then simply did what seemed to be natural for a person in your situation at that time. You weren't taking any kind of bold or unique or rebellious step by getting involved with IWO. This was the kind of thing that people in your situation did and it wasn't something that seemed particularly different. It certainly wasn't as different as running away from home, would you say?

Sennett: No, and it also began to give me some answers to the puzzling things I had begun to see in the world outside. I began to think in terms of the people I had met in the days when I was hoboing and the kind of people they were and the people that were looking for work. I began to learn why they were out of work; in my own mind, it was very stimulating for me. I was beginning, therefore, to learn about what was really going on in the world.

MW: Did it stimulate you to do a lot of reading?

Sennett: I started to read quite a bit within the limitations of my comprehension. I then was introduced to Jack London's works. I began to read Upton Sinclair and that to me, his muckraking novels, were so exciting and informative that I tried to read everything that Upton Sinclair had written. From Sinclair and London I went on to Sinclair Lewis.

MW: Now, did you just stumble into this or did the IWO recommend that you read these things?

Sennett: Some. But much more after I attended the Communist party training school in late 1932.

MW: What age are we talking about, seventeen or eighteen?

Sennett: Sixteen and seventeen, because I joined the YCL shortly after I joined the IWO. It was almost simultaneous. It may have been only three or four months later [that] I joined the Young Communist League. That was in August of 1931. On my birthday, October 6, 1931, I was seventeen.

MW: So you were getting another education on the side. You weren't still in high school; you were out of school, you were working.

Sennett: I was out of school. When I returned from California, I never went back to get formal schooling.

MW: So you never had any formal schooling after that; that was the end of it?

Sennett: That was the end of public schools.

DIRECT ACTION TO "UN-EVICT" THE UNEMPLOYED, 1931-32

MW: So from then on, your education really, in a sense, came from the Communist party or these organizations associated with it.

Sennett: It certainly did.

MW: Can you tell me a little bit more about that. Did it at any point become more formalized education in these organizations? Did you take classes and learn a specific body of information? Did you read Marx or Lenin, and did you know about Marx or Lenin? Did you hear of those works?

Sennett: I really hadn't heard anything about Marx or Lenin. I may have heard of it when I was attending Workmen's Circle School, the Yiddish school that I attended. But I don't remember what I may have heard about Marx and Marxism. It began to make a deep impression on me when I joined the Young Communist League. I didn't join because I heard of Marx. I joined because I saw something that was being done to deal with the crisis of our times in a very practical way. I want to relate one incident, for example, that clearly illustrated the meaning of Communist answers to the problems created by unemployment. I was called one day and asked to help the Unemployed Councils put the furniture of a family who had just been evicted back in their home.

MW: I don't understand that. What do you mean, helping to put furniture back into the homes of people who were evicted. Whose furniture?

Sennett: The furniture of the people who were evicted; we put the furniture back in their home after their furniture was thrown out on the street by the bailiff carrying out a court order.

MW: So you were "un-evicting" them in effect.

Sennett: We were putting them back in the homes and "un-evicting" them.

MW: --Which was in effect a violation of the law.

Sennett: Oh, it definitely was. This was a city ordinance. These people were evicted by due process of law. It was a real lesson to me at that time that made me decide to get involved in the Young Communist League. The eviction, I recall, was on the west side on Sixteenth Street near Kedzie Avenue. I was told, "There is an eviction we have just been informed about. People have had their furniture thrown out on the sidewalk in front of their house. They have nowhere to go. We intend to put their furniture back into the house." I went with this group from the Unemployed Council hall to the place where we saw the furniture out on the sidewalk, and the leader of this group spoke to the man who was evicted. He was standing there together with his wife and his children. The spokesman for the Council talked to him about the circumstances of the eviction and his financial condition. We learned that the family had run out of money. They couldn't pay their rent. Neither the husband nor the wife had a job. They had no resources, no relatives that could help them. The man had gone to the welfare station, but the case was still being investigated. There was no approval. They were told to wait. They could not get any welfare whatsoever, and in those days there was no cash relief. The welfare, when granted, was in kind--canned and packaged goods, scrip payment of the checks for rent to the landlord. All of this had not happened yet and so the Unemployed Council took action and got results.

At that particular time, the leader of the Unemployed Council group said, "All right"--and he told us the story--"what we're going to do is to take this furniture and put it all back in the house. I'm going to jimmy the lock"--there was a padlock put on the door--"and we're going to break the padlock open and we're going to enter the house. Now, there is some danger. We've got to work fast. Police will come. If they catch us here they'll arrest us, so we've got to do it very quickly. Once we get the furniture back in the house, the landlord has to go back to court to file another eviction notice and it takes thirty days for another court order to be issued. In that thirty days, we intend to get these people on welfare, get their rent paid, and see that they are provided with the food they need to eat. After we get the furniture back in the house we'll send a delegation down to the welfare station."

In a very short time, with the help of other people outside of the house, we accomplished our mission. It seemed to me that it took less than fifteen minutes to put all the furniture back after the padlock was broken open. The gas and electricity had been turned off. The gas connection was padlocked in the off position and a hacksaw was used to saw the lock open and start the flow of gas to the kitchen stove. Then the electricity. The lock fuse in the fuse box was jimmied and replaced with a regular fuse.

Sennett: The next step was the delegation visit to the local welfare station with the family that afternoon. I was on the delegation that day. The group pressure worked. We were able to get immediate action in that emergency food was supplied and assurances were given that the rent would be paid and the family would be provided with regular welfare assistance.

I learned that what individuals could not get done by themselves they could achieve when they organized and fought together. And many dozens of evictions later, we also learned what we needed to go a lot further to change the circumstances of welfare.

MW: Did you participate in dozens of these kinds of events?

Sennett: I participated in many evictions and was arrested in a number of instances. When we were caught, we would be thrown into jail for a few hours or a day or two unless we were booked for trial. I was only booked once and had to go to trial.

MW: What happened in the case where you were booked and went to trial?

Sennett: I went to jail with others and served time once for three days, only because we would not pay the fine assessed.

MW: You were convicted?

Sennett: I was convicted and I served in Chicago's Bridewell prison for three days.

MW: Do you remember what year this was and how old you were?

Sennett: I think it was in 1932.

MW: So that was your first encounter with the law?

Sennett: The first time I was brought to court, brought to trial.

MW: From that moment on then, you had a police record.

Sennett: Yes, which the FBI mentions in the FBI's memoirs about me! [laughs]

MW: In the FBI record that you got under the Freedom of Information Act?

Sennett: Right.

MW: Do you think that marks the beginning of when you became a known radical to the authorities?

Sennett: At least for the record. In all the other instances there was no written jail record but the authorities were recording my presence at all kinds of actions.

MW: We are beginning now to get into your political life and before we do that, I wonder if we ought to go back over any of the earlier period to see whether we have left anything out that is important and significant. I'm particularly interested in the shaping of your world view and of your education. We have got a lot of very interesting points on that from your family and from your jobs and from your going out to California and all of those things. Is there anything that has been left out that is significant in that regard?

Sennett: There probably is, but I can't think of it at the moment.

MW: Was your family aware of your political activity?

Sennett: To a limited extent.

MW: How did they feel about this?

AN EARLY MARRIAGE--1932

Sennett: I was almost out of the house by that time as I had a girl friend, Irene Harris, who was in the Communist movement, and we were married in 1932 when I was seventeen-and-a-half years of age. It was a very short marriage that was dissolved in less than a year. I moved with Irene into her mother's house. Irene's mother was on welfare and her son Arthur also lived at home.

MW: That got you out finally? You never went back again?

Sennett: That got me out finally and, though I split up with Irene, I never went back home again.

MW: This political activity came after that or before that?

Sennett: No, the political activity started before that and continued.

MW: So you met her through the political activity?

Sennett: Oh, yes. She was one of the militants. She was one of those who would scream and spit at cops and hit them in the nuts if they were roughing up demonstrators.

MW: You wouldn't attribute to her your political activism?

Sennett: Oh, no, I became active before I met her, and I met her only after I had become involved.

MW: All during this period, did anybody ever tell you, "You don't want to mess around with those people. They are dangerous radicals. Why are you getting involved with those kinds of people? Shouldn't you do something more respectable and stay out of trouble?" Was anybody in your family or anybody else that you knew telling you anything like that?

Sennett: No one in my family did, but I recall at one time that I was picked up by the Chicago "Red Squad" at a demonstration in front of the alderman's house. I guess this was in 1932. The alderman was Jake Arvey. He was nationally known and he was a member of the Democratic National Committee, but his base was in the twenty-fourth ward in the Jewish community and he was the boss of the Democratic party machine in Chicago. I think we were demanding an end to evictions and there was a demonstration in front of his house. I was arrested. The Chicago Red Squad had singled me out for the lone arrest that day. They were a Chicago-based police operation which concentrated on going after Communists, trade unionists, Progressives, and liberals. They had everybody's names, they kept records and they, of course, had informers who reported to them as well as the FBI. We knew the people on the Red Squad and they recognized us. Anytime they were around to demonstrations or rallies they would take pictures and note those in attendance. They might single out those whom they knew and arrest the ringleaders. Sometimes they took them to the police station. Sometimes they simply released them, but they followed people or picked them up to harass them.

They picked me up and arrested me at the Arvey demonstration and brought me to the Fillmore police station on the west side. On the way, they had the usual division of labor. One police officer was the tough guy and one posed as the soft guy. The tough guy would say, "I'm going to beat the shit out of you. When we get you inside that jail we're going to make you a bloody mess." The other guy would say, "Look don't talk to the kid that way. He's just a kid. He doesn't know what he's doing." Then he was the one who started to talk about the mess I was going to make out of my life, and how it was best to get out now, while the getting was good, because this was going to lead nowhere, and I was going to end up in jail for the rest of my life. In the meantime, the other guy is swearing at me and hollering at me, and the "softy" would say, "Leave him alone, don't touch him." So you had that kind of treatment.

I was thrown into the Fillmore police station, and the group that had demonstrated saw, or somebody had told them, that I was spirited away by the police. Since I was the only one arrested,

Sennett: the crowd moved on to the Fillmore police station. They started chanting [raises voice], "Let him go! Get him out!" [laughs] Sure enough, they took me out of the jail cell and let me go. A call had come from Alderman Arvey telling the police to release me.

MW: Did the cops ever beat you up or anything like that?

Sennett: Oh, sure, we got beaten up even after we were arrested. We got beaten up in jails even when they had no intention of booking us for trial. They would hit us with their fists, their clubs, or even the butt end of their revolvers. I was once hit with a club by a cop. I was bleeding from the head, and he just pushed me in the cell and he threw a towel in, so that I could hold it to my head to stanch the bleeding.

MW: I can imagine what your attitude toward the police was at that time. From your earlier life, what was your attitude toward government, or was this a new experience for you as a result of your political activity?

Sennett: From the days when I learned about private detectives working for the railroads, I looked upon policemen as being the lowest kind of people. They were doing the dirty work for capitalism. Obviously, we looked upon them as heartless, conniving, uncaring people.

DEVELOPING CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

MW: Did you have a strong class consciousness at that time? How did you feel about middle-class and upper-class people?

Sennett: At that particular time I began to develop what I considered a loyalty to the working class. I felt that my family was a working class family, and I too was a worker. And it was the workers who bore the brunt of capitalist exploitation. I made a distinction between the working class and the bosses who were the wealthy, the upper classes, but I felt that the middle class, small business people, and professionals had more in common with working people than they did with the upper class.

MW: Did it ever occur to you during this period that you were a capable person and you could make it in the system? In other words, why not advance your own career as opposed to spending all of your time helping people get back in houses from which they had been evicted, that sort of thing. Did that ever occur to you?

Sennett: No, I wasn't thinking in terms of any kind of career. In discussions with many people I learned that not many who wanted positions, careers, or wealth were getting very far in those days. I thought only of the moment: this is what we have to do today. I didn't even think in long-term views of where I was heading, or where I was going, or what would happen to me as a result.

MW: Did you feel the system was really closed to you?

Sennett: Absolutely, I certainly did. I thought it needed fundamental changes to open up opportunities for jobs and economic security.

MW: I think we ought to leave to another session this whole political thing, but I want to be sure we have wrapped up everything about family, early life, early education, and your formative period.

[Interview 2: August 6, 1981]##

MW: In this second session, we are going to pick up a few loose ends dealing with the early period of your life, your childhood, youth, and early adult life. Bill, you have some particular things that you thought to include since the last time. Why don't you start out with those and I'll interrupt if things aren't clear.

Sennett: When I first quit school at fourteen before the end of 1928 and went to work for the Chicago Title and Trust Company, I had to attend continuation school one day a week. The law required that those who didn't graduate high school and left school before age seventeen take schooling in order to continue their education. I had one year of such follow-up schooling for the period that I worked for the Chicago Title and Trust Company. That year of continued education ended with my leaving the job.

GETTING AN EDUCATION IN THE COMMUNIST PARTY

Sennett: My education was continued when the YCL, the Young Communist League, sent me to the district training school of the Communist party of Illinois. The district encompassed Illinois and part of Indiana. This school was held in Chicago in mid-1932. It was a four-week course of intensive study, full time, in Marxism. As I recall, the subject matter was principles of Marxism, elements of political education, trade unions in America, history of the Communist party of the United States and of the Communist International.

MW: Can I ask you a little bit about that school? Were there any people at that school who subsequently became famous or important to the Communist party?

Sennett: As I recall, some became functionaries in the Communist party, the Young Communist League, or as trade union organizers. My memory fades when it comes to the question of the actual people who attended that particular school.

MW: How many people were there?

Sennett: There were about thirty people at the school.

MW: What do you think of that education? Were you impressed with the capabilities of the instructors relative to the instructors you had known in public school and so forth?

Sennett: Well, it certainly was informative and interesting for me. I was just an average student in public school. I really wasn't motivated, but I was motivated here. The big thing about it is that when I began to dig into the subject matter and read the material, Marx's works and related matter, I found, of course, that I had to do it with a dictionary and get help on comprehension. I couldn't understand many of the words and it was difficult for me to grasp the concepts at first.

MW: Did you read all the heavy stuff?

Sennett: I read and talked to the school director (I don't remember who it was at that particular time) and told him about my difficulty in grasping a lot of the material and, as a result, he did some special, individual work with me, and it helped very much.

I was beginning to broaden my knowledge of the English language in many ways. But in addition to that, it helped me to understand whole concepts a lot easier than I was able to grasp when I was in grammar school.

MW: You are not saying that you learned the English language in the sense of learning it as opposed to Yiddish, but you mean expanding your vocabulary and developing your articulateness.

Sennett: Correct. Whatever rules of grammar I picked up in grammar school were elementary. Reading gave me the best training in the usage of grammar.

MW: Do you have any recollection of whether all of the people at this school, including the instructors, seemed to be working class people or were there some middle-class and well-educated people there?

Sennett: There were a few people who had gone through college. Yes, it was a mixture. Of course, it seemed a lot easier for those people who had formal education to grasp the essence of the subjects under study.

MW: Were you the same age as all of the other students?

Sennett: No, I was probably the youngest student at that time. I don't remember anybody younger than I. Of course, since it was a Communist party training school, there were not only young people. There were also some middle-aged and older people.

MW: Okay, let's go on then from there.

III Organizing for the Communist Party

Sennett: The unemployed movement organized by the Communist party was the largest and most effective in the country. In addition to dealing with evictions in the most direct and helpful manner, the Unemployed Councils successfully pressured local welfare bureaus to provide food, clothing, and shelter for thousands of destitute families, and I participated in many of the actions that made those things take place.

MW: When you say it was the most effective in the country, are you saying it on the basis of your understanding or what was told to you at that time, or are you basing that statement on your subsequent review of the period and your understanding of it?

Sennett: All I know is that there were some sympathetic social workers--welfare workers--at the time. As far as organizations were concerned, I didn't know of any local groups that I ran into, although there were obviously local groups of people (and I'm not sure exactly how they were organized), who were interested in the plight of the unemployed and those people who had to go on welfare. The most obvious group which you might say was a "competitor" was that which was organized by the Socialist party. That was the Workers' Alliance, which eventually merged with the Unemployed Councils. It was somewhat smaller and not always as effective and visible as the Unemployed Councils.

MW: I just wanted to make clear when you make an evaluation statement like that whether you were saying that on the basis of your recollection of what you thought at that time, or whether you have subsequently reviewed the period from other historical writings and have made that judgment on the basis of what others have said about it.

Sennett: At the time, of course, I judged that on the basis of what I was able to see or what others said. In reviewing the period historically, I learned that the Workers' Alliance was more effective in its work than I realized at that time.

The Unemployed Councils were set up as a national organization, I learned, in 1930, and coordinated their local activities through neighborhood councils and block committees in various cities.

Within the American Federation of Labor, the Communists also pressed for action--that is, for legislation--and concentrated their activities on the enactment of what was called the Workers' Unemployment Insurance Bill.* An AF of L committee was formed as a result of the pressure of Communist party activists in the union bodies. It was called the American Federation of Labor Committee for Unemployment, Insurance, and Relief. This group was headed by a Communist, Louis Weinstock, who was a member of the central committee of the Communist party. [spells name] His base was as a leader of the painters union.

THE WASHINGTON HUNGER MARCHES OF 1931 AND 1932

Sennett: In addition to local demonstrations, parades, mass meetings, picketing, petition campaigns, local marches at the state Capitol and so on, there were two national hunger marches to Washington. I participated in both marches. The first one took place in December of 1931. The second was during December of 1932.

Our aim was to send representatives of the unemployed from all parts of the country to the Capitol to demand administrative and legislative action in behalf of jobless and underprivileged people. We left in trucks and cars from our home cities, adding participants as we held meetings and rallies in the various towns and cities where we stopped en route. Unfortunately for me, I was taken ill with a flu virus in the first hunger march and was kept from continuing my journey. I only got as far as Detroit and ended my participation there.

*An unemployment insurance program, along with other welfare programs, was introduced by the Social Security Act of 1935.

Sennett: In 1932, I joined the second national hunger march to Washington. This time more cars were lined up for the trip, and I also was able to travel in a car instead of an open truck as I did the previous year. Our schedule of meetings along the way was met with enthusiastic response by people who were brought together by local Unemployed Council groups.

Our slogans and demands were the following: work or wages, don't starve, fight for unemployment insurance, immediate cash relief, public works to replace private industry unemployment, stop discrimination against Negroes, food for children, and so on.

MW: Was this openly a Communist operation?

Sennett: No, it was not. The Unemployed Councils were known, of course, by many people to be led by many Communists. But it was not a Communist operation. The overwhelming majority of people who joined the Unemployed Council were not Communists.

MW: Is this what subsequently came to be called a Communist front?

Sennett: Yes, it was. But it was an overwhelmingly non-Communist membership.

MW: Would you say that most of the people in the organization as far as your own personal experience was concerned, were aware of its Communist leadership?

Sennett: It seemed that most of the people either knew about it or didn't care. They were more interested in the immediate demands that were put forward and accepted their leadership.

MW: Was there a media response to this activity--red baiting and that sort of thing?

Sennett: Certainly. The media certainly wasn't fair to the movement at that particular time, and I don't recall the Chicago newspapers being very sympathetic to what the Unemployed Councils were doing. We Communists and even non-Communist progressive activists were portrayed as wild-eyed violent people. There was the use of the old stereotype of a wildy bearded man with a bomb with the fuse burning in his hands.

We got to Washington after holding many local meetings. In some places where we held open-air rallies, local police came to break them up. We would reassemble in halls and concluded by holding a number of successful indoor meetings.

Sennett: One of the rallies I recall that I participated in was held, I believe, in Hammond, Indiana, not too far from Chicago. Just a few hours after we started, it was broken up by the local police using tear gas to disperse the gathering.

MW: This was during the Roosevelt administration?

Sennett: No, this was 1932. Roosevelt was elected in November but hadn't yet taken office. He took office in March of 1933.

MW: This was after the campaign then, wasn't it, after the election?

Sennett: It was after the election. Roosevelt was elected, but Hoover was still in office.

MW: Was there any feeling about Roosevelt in the group that he might change things?

Sennett: No, many of us, of course, weren't sure what Roosevelt would do. He had not outlined the New Deal in advance in his election campaign, but many of us felt that it might be better, at least, to get rid of Hoover. We weren't sure exactly why, and we weren't sure what was going to happen.

MW: Was there any official party endorsement?

Sennett: No, the Communist party had its own candidates at that time. William Z. Foster and James W. Ford were the candidates for president and vice president.

MW: Did you ever meet Foster during that period?

Sennett: I didn't meet him during that period. I met him later in life. It was estimated that three thousand marchers arrived in Washington for the hunger march. The idea was to place the demands of the Unemployed Councils before the federal administration. The trade unionists among the marchers who were present were going to meet William Green, who was then head of the American Federation of Labor, to make demands upon the conservative, and what we called, reactionary leadership to support the demands of the unemployed, and particularly to support the demand for unemployment insurance, which William Green at one time had called a Communist plot. We were met in Washington by more than twice our number of marching policemen. We marched along Pennsylvania Avenue, and I noted that there were policemen with submachine guns on the roofs of buildings along the line of march.

MW: How many marchers were there?

Sennett: There were estimated to be three thousand marchers at that time representing the tens of thousands of members actually in the Unemployed Councils. We also learned that troops were held in readiness nearby in Washington. So it wasn't a very gay occasion and in the bleak winter. I believe that the actual parade was held on December 6, 1932. It was one in which our demands were brought to the attention of the government. Hoover refused to see our delegation headed by Herbert Benjamin, who was then national secretary of the Unemployed Councils. They didn't get in to see the president, and the fact is that they were only allowed to talk to some flunkies in the administration who promised to bring the matter to the president's attention.

But the activities of the Unemployed Councils resulted in a number of concessions that were made to the unemployed even before Roosevelt was inaugurated. I would say the Unemployed Councils were a major factor in the eventual passage of unemployment insurance legislation. But in addition to that, welfare stations began to receive delegations of the Unemployed Councils without the kind of harassment that had existed in the past. In many places, in different states and local areas, cash relief would be given to people who were on welfare instead of just food staples.

MW: Aside from the demonstration, did you go around and call on people on Capitol Hill and use the standard lobbying techniques that we are familiar with now?

Sennett: Since it was a lame duck Congress (1932) and Congress was not in session, there was no congressional lobbying, as I recall.

WORKING AT THE WORLD'S FAIR of 1933

Sennett: After I got back home, through the help of a friend, I was fortunate to get a well-paying job in early 1933 at the Belgian Village of the world's fair.* Some people remember the fair as the place where Sally Rand, the fan dancer, fleetingly exhibited the charms of her body as she manipulated large fans rather gracefully. I recall that time because, working at the fair I, too, was charmed by Sally's dance routine. There was a controversy about whether Sally danced in the nude. Actually, she wore flesh-colored tights. But even then, it titillated a lot of people and, as a young man, I was titillated as well.

*Century of Progress Exhibition, 1933-1934.

Sennett: My own job at the fair was made possible by virtue of my experience in White City, an amusement park in Chicago's south side. I had done some work as a "barker" to attract people so that they would spend some money on games for prizes. At the fair, I was selling a small wind-up toy monkey which I would throw among a group of people as they stopped or hesitated in the streets of the Belgian Village. Then I would deliver a spiel about the wonders of the mechanical monkey to get people to buy it as a souvenir.

At a later time, I worked at my employer's perfume concession and I remember that he alleged that we were selling perfume which was pressed from fresh Belgian water lilies. The perfumes, about which I knew very little, were packaged for sale in the Belgian Village.

MW: You weren't employed by the Belgian government for their exhibition or anything like that?

Sennett: No.

MW: This was just a concessionaire who operated under lease at the Belgian Village.

Sennett: Correct, and he was an entrepreneur who had come from Belgium.

MW: He spoke English, of course.

Sennett: Yes, he did. The Belgian Village job was lucrative because I was paid a base salary and also commissions. I don't remember the base pay. It might have only been five or ten dollars a week, but I averaged, in the five-month period that the fair lasted, about fifty dollars a week, which was big money to me. But to make that possible, I worked about twelve hours a day, every day, for five months straight, seven days a week. I recall that I didn't take a single day off. I was so happy to have a job and to earn that kind of money.

MW: Was this still a period when you giving virtually all of your salary to the family? Were you living at home?

Sennett: No, this was the period [when] I was already married to Irene and I, therefore, was using this money to support not only myself and Irene, but her mother and her brother. Irene's father was not alive. But that family was on welfare, and I had enjoyed the benefits, if I can call it that, of welfare by living with Florence Harris, Irene's mother. So my money then came in very handy, and the family lived very well for at least that period when I was earning that kind of money.



Above: Selling team at Belgian Village, Chicago World's Fair. Toy mechanical monkeys pitched. On inside of shoppe Sennett also sold perfume "pressed from Belgian water lilies." Bill Sennett shown third from left. 1933.

Right: New "working clothes" for sales job. Bill Sennett, aged 17, at Riverview Park, Illinois, June 1932.



Sennett: The world's fair closed in 1933 after a five-month stint. It opened up again in 1934, but I did not go back to work for the fair because of my work with the YCL.

With the closing of the fair in 1933, I was unable to find steady work, but I held a number of short-time jobs. I was filling in at the time for a small, independent milkman delivering milk by truck. Just to give you an idea of what some salaries were like at that time, I was paid five dollars a week driving a panel milk truck and delivering milk. This was quite a come down from my income at the world's fair.

MEETING AUGUSTA MACHEN

Sennett: Shortly thereafter in 1933, I met Gussie, whose formal name was Augusta Machen. She charmed me with her beauty, her piano playing, and her serenity. Obviously, my passion for Gussie eventually led to an estrangement with Irene, and our eventual separation and divorce after less than a year of marriage.

Gussie came from Lithuanian parents who were part of a left-wing fraternal order known as the LDS. This was a fraternal society, which supported a semi-weekly Lithuanian Marxist newspaper known as the Vilnis.

MW: Do you know what the LDS stood for?

Sennett: LDS meant something like the Lithuanian Democratic Society. I don't know if it was literal, but this was a Lithuanian name. The paper was published in Chicago for a Lithuanian audience. As I recall at that time, I was told that it had a circulation of about four thousand.

ORGANIZING THE SOUTH SIDE BLACK COMMUNITY

Sennett: Early in 1934, the Young Communist League asked me to take on a temporary organizational assignment with the south side section in the black community. Since I was living alone at the time, I then felt that it would be important to move in with a family on the south side. I moved in with a black family whose name was Holman. Nat Holman was a YCL member I had known, and he was about my age. We became very good friends. I moved in with his family. They were on welfare, lived in a cold-water flat in a three-story

Sennett: building in a slum neighborhood. The plumbing didn't work and I was very squeamish about the rats and roaches I encountered there. It didn't help to put me at ease, at least for a time.

Nevertheless, I felt obligated to learn how to live under these conditions, since discrimination against blacks had forced such conditions upon them. Whites, I felt, needed to feel and understand that reality.

The Young Communist League paid me about two or three dollars every week to help me get along. While I worked on the south side, of course, the Holman family also saw to it that I survived, and this was made possible from whatever welfare assistance they received.

MW: Did you pay them for your board and room?

Sennett: No, I did not.

MW: So they just took you in?

Sennett: They just took me in and realized that I didn't have enough to pay board and room, that the two or three dollars a week was necessary for car fare and lunches while I was out.

MW: But they were on welfare. They had hardly any money anyway. So what was living like there? You had no hot water. What about food? Did you have enough to eat? Did they have enough to eat?

Sennett: They didn't have a rounded menu, but nevertheless, there was always something. You could always open up relief cans that were supplied. We not only ate that, but I was also able to eat at the homes of other sympathetic YCLers and Communist party members.

MW: How many people were in the home and family?

Sennett: As I recall, there were three children. There was a mother, but no father in the house.

MW: Nat Holman was--

Sennett: Nat Holman was a YCLer who was active in the Young Communist League on the south side.

MW: So it wasn't his household.

Sennett: It was his mother's.

MW: His mother's household?

Sennett: That is correct.

MW: So this was a household headed by a mother and there was Nat and who else?

Sennett: There were two others.

MW: So you made four.

Sennett: No, that made five.

MW: How many rooms were there in the flat?

Sennett: I don't remember. There might have been six rooms there.

MW: That's a big flat.

Sennett: It was a flat, that's right.

MW: So you weren't cramped for space.

Sennett: Well, it was a hovel, and the wind whistled through the cracks in the windows. The windows were broken and they were temporarily covered up with either paper, board, or whatever--

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MW: Okay, let's finish up on the household and what it was like. I wanted to ask you about the heat.

Sennett: There was a coal stove in the kitchen and it was used for cooking as well as for heating, but obviously the rest of the rooms were pretty cold. I don't remember a stove in the living room. There certainly was no heat in the bedrooms.

MW: You never ran out of coal, you had coal?

Sennett: At that time, the Holmans were getting coal and they were getting it by using scrip provided by the welfare stations. The scrip guaranteed that the coal dealer would be paid for the coal.

MW: Was the attitude in the black community at that time one of militant resistance to their condition or was it kind of passive acceptance? What was the general mood?

Sennett: Oh, it certainly was--

MW: It certainly was militant?

Sennett: It certainly was militant. There were more blacks in the Unemployed Councils in Chicago than any other national group. They responded to action calls in large numbers. There were more evictions and more eviction struggles in the black communities than anywhere else in the city. In 1931, four black people who were putting the furniture back in the home of an evicted family were killed by the Chicago police. There was a demonstration on the south side at the funeral for those four black men. It was that demonstration, which is what impressed me most and convinced me to join the Young Communist League in August of 1931. It was estimated that there were between fifty and sixty thousand people who marched in the funeral procession. Thousands of people on that day joined the Unemployed Councils. And many joined the Communist party and Young Communist League as well.

MW: Do you have any rough estimate of how many people were in the Young Communist League during that period?

Sennett: During that period there was a lot of turnover. Many people signed cards like those at the mass demonstration and they were never brought into the organization itself. I believe that in 1932 there were about four to five thousand Communist party members in the district with between one thousand and fifteen hundred in the Young Communist League.

FIGHTING RACISM IN SOCIETY AND IN THE PARTY

MW: What about the issue of racism? Was there no feeling of racism in the Young Communist League? What about the attitudes toward blacks, and what were black attitudes toward the predominant white community during that period?

Sennett: The Young Communist League and Communist party were organizations that challenged racism early, and my own experience was that I first learned about the nature of discrimination through the organization itself. The organization took what I considered pioneering steps to fight against discrimination and racism.

I remember that the beaches were segregated in the thirties. And at Jackson Park Beach on the south side of Chicago, there was a fence set up to divide blacks from whites on the beach. The Young Communist League and Communist party organized people to stop segregation on the beaches. As a result, fights broke out which resulted in physical measures--tearing down the dividing fences by people opposed to segregation. I participated in a number of those actions and eventually the fence dividing line came down for good.

Sennett: There was a mood in the black community at that time in which blacks accepted the presence of whites in their neighborhood, something that isn't very safe in the Chicago's south side these days. I lived in that neighborhood, and there were whites who came into that neighborhood, and whites and blacks mixed in the black neighborhood. Whites and blacks didn't mix in the white neighborhoods. Socializing by whites and blacks was something that the Young Communist League and the Communist party did on a widespread and open scale, breaking down segregated barriers. Of course, this resulted in attacks by white hoodlums on the whites and blacks who fraternized with each other.

MW: We read that a lot of present-day racism exists between blacks and immigrant groups in this country who are themselves discriminated against, but feel themselves in some kind of pecking order and are hostile to blacks moving into their neighborhoods, because they are upwardly mobile and they feel threatened by groups lower down on the social scale. Was there any of that sort of thing; that is, did the Polish and the Lithuanian and the Jewish communities have attitudes toward the blacks which are comparable to what we read about today?

Sennett: Oh, yes, this is one of the positive features of the work done by the Communist movement to break down discrimination. The old national groups of the left wing were a microcosm of American society--separate neighborhoods of separate nationalities in the large cities of the country. Many Poles, Russians, Lithuanians, Jews, Italians, Germans were members of the Communist party in the twenties and thirties and, as a carryover, they had language federations. Even in the left groups there was anti-Negro (that was the word used in that day) prejudice which was not always expressed openly. It wasn't expressed openly because the official position of the Communist party and the Young Communist League was that discrimination is reactionary, discrimination is a product of the capitalist system, and discrimination needs to be destroyed.

But the inward actions of a number were actually discriminatory. As a result, the Communist party and the Young Communist League carried on continual education in its own ranks. In fact, both organizations would expel people who were proven white chauvinists. There were trials within the organizations and even public trials to dramatize the need to root out the poison of white chauvinism.

MW: How did you define chauvinism? What was a white chauvinist?

Sennett: A white chauvinist was any person who exhibited racist attitudes, whether it was social, economic, or political discrimination. Communists had undertaken to eliminate racism and fight for full equality, and if Communists would shrink from that particular duty

- Sennett: and they were accused of aiding and abetting racism, or if a Communist didn't challenge racist slurs, then that Communist was subject to being brought up on charges and could be expelled from the Communist movement.
- MW: Were you aware at that time of Stalin's theoretical writings about the national question and nationalism?
- Sennett: I hadn't really read them until later in the thirties.
- MW: So there was no talk that you were aware of of there being a Negro nation?
- Sennett: Yes, there was. I heard talk about the concept of a Negro nation and I read the Communist material, the idea that the blacks in the contiguous areas of the Southern states constituted a nation within a nation.
- MW: And ought to have their own nation-state?
- Sennett: --Ought to have their own nation-state, yes.
- MW: Was that part of the line that you discussed in meetings and so forth?
- Sennett: I don't recall that this was a big subject for discussion by Communists in public meetings. It seems to me that concept was confined to the Communist party. I am sure, of course, that the blacks who joined and participated in the unemployed movement weren't generally knowledgeable about that being the Communist position. It was considered to be a theoretical matter but not something that was pushed and practiced.
- MW: So where do we go next?

PARTY PRESSURES AND PERSONAL LIFE

- Sennett: I finished my assignment on the south side, which was for a period of about three months, and my romance with Gussie had blossomed in the meantime. We decided, in September of 1934, to live together. We moved into a furnished room in Hyde Park. Though we were later married legally in October of 1938, we dated our wedding anniversary from September 1, 1934, the beginning of our nonlegal period of cohabitation.

MW: Was that a big thing socially at that time, to live together without being married? Was there social pressure against it or was that fairly common, as it is today.

Sennett: No, it was not very common. It was uncommon, and when we lived together, we said we were married. Generally, we didn't let even our Communist friends know that we were not legally married. There were other people that I knew in the Communist movement who were not legally married, but it was not a practice, and the Communists certainly didn't advocate this. Communists were accused of practicing "free love." Far from it. In fact, the Communists were more puritanical than any other group that I had come in contact with. If a Communist activist was messing around with somebody else's mate or if a person was promiscuous, that person could be called to account for his or her "harmful" behavior.

MW: One other comment that is frequently made by non-Communists about Communists is that the Communist party interferes extensively in the personal lives of members of the party, telling them in effect what their personal lives should be like, whom they should marry, and how they should raise their kids--that sort of thing. Was that your experience?

Sennett: It wasn't so. My experience is that those who were part of a "cadre," or the leadership, were expected to be exemplary people. Therefore, they were to be people who are moral, who are honest, and who do not participate in deception, either in their personal lives or in their political lives. It is to that extent that the Communist party would intervene with the personal lives of its people.

MW: Now, during this period we have been discussing, you were a member of YCL, but you were not a member of the Communist party, is that right?

BECOMING YCL SECTION ORGANIZER FOR CHICAGO'S WEST SIDE

Sennett: No, I was not. That's something I graduated into at a later date. Gussie and I moved to Chicago's west side early in 1935 because the Young Communist League had proposed that I become a section organizer to replace an old friend who in some ways was my youthful mentor in the Young Communist League. His name was Isidor Tivin and he was about twelve years older than I. Tivin was "graduating" (going into Communist party work), and I was therefore brought in to take his place as section organizer.

Sennett: Being the section organizer meant that I was to coordinate the work of YCL branches on the west side, which included some suburban towns like Cicero and Berwyn, Austin, Le Grange, and so on. The branches or clubs generally had from ten to twenty-five members each. The district, as I explained, was the area of all of Illinois and part of Indiana, and that part of Indiana included Gary, which had the largest steel mills in the country. The Young Communist League of Illinois-Indiana was headed by Jack Kling, who had been sent in from New York. He was about three years older than I. He worked full time, as did several other members on the district staff. Section organizers like myself in nonindustrial areas were expected to get income-producing jobs.

MW: Are you talking about organizers for the YCL?

Sennett: For the Young Communist League, that's right. The geographical lines of the Communist party and Young Communist League were generally the same, the boundary lines in terms of where the sections were. So there was also a section of the Communist party headed by a party section organizer.

FUNDING THE ORGANIZING EFFORT

MW: This sounds like a very impressive and rather expensive organizational effort. Where was the money coming from?

Sennett: First of all, most of the functionaries worked and did their jobs part time. In the Young Communist League, as I recall, there were only three full-time people, the district organizer plus two others, for the district. In the sections, the section organizers worked or were supposed to work or they were on welfare, whatever the case may have been. But they were not being paid. The money and income was minimal and always in short supply. It came from dues and from contributions. Some of the better off members financially made larger contributions to help support the Communist party or the Young Communist League. The Communist party district organizer, for example, made the munificent salary of about fifteen dollars a week. His name was Morris Childs. He succeeded the district organizer that I can recall whose name was Bill Gebert. I mention Bill Gebert because he was a foreign-born Polish worker who later returned to Poland and, under the Communist government set up in Poland, Bill became a member of the foreign office and, at one time, their ambassador to Turkey. Gebert was one of those who helped in my early education in Chicago.

MW: What has become of him, do you know?

Sennett: He is an old man; I understand from a friend of mine that he is in his late eighties and still lives in Poland.

I was talking about Morris Childs's salary. He was the district organizer who took Bill Gebert's place. He earned fifteen dollars a week, and he was a married man and had one child. Kling, on the other hand, who was single, earned about seven or eight dollars a week at the time. Now, that was supposed to be the salary, but neither Childs nor Kling were getting that regularly. There were weeks when there was no money and there was no pay and people just continued to work and did what they could in order to survive.

MW: You gave us the figure earlier of the fifty dollars a week that you earned at the world's fair, and you said that was a really big sum. What would you say was an average working man's salary during that period?

Sennett: The average working man's salary in the middle thirties was probably about fifteen dollars a week. Auto workers were getting about thirty-five cents an hour in 1932 or '33 until their pay was increased because of union organization.

MW: So what would that work out to a week?

Sennett: On the basis of a forty-hour week, auto workers would earn fourteen dollars a week.

MW: So some of your organizers were getting that amount for full-time work and others were getting only seven dollars.

Sennett: Theoretically, because they weren't always paid and they had expenses getting around.

MW: But some of them were getting as low as seven dollars a week for full-time organizing.

Sennett: That's right.

MW: Could you make ends meet on seven dollars a week?

Sennett: If you lived in someone's home as a boarder, or if you shared an apartment, which was quite common in those days. And if you lived meagerly and frugally, you could manage--barely.

MW: But you certainly couldn't be the head of a household with a family.

Sennett: No, in my situation, for example, Gussie was earning about ten dollars a week. She was fortunate. There was a period when she was able to get a job with the state on civil service and, as a result, she had a rather steady income for those days. In order to make ends meet, Gussie and I doubled up with other couples in our living quarters, or else we were boarders in other families' homes. This was a necessary practice by many families even outside the Communist movement at that time, because even though rentals were rather low, and during the Depression you could probably buy a whole house for a thousand dollars if you had a hundred and fifty dollars to put down, there weren't too many people who could afford to do that.

PROGRAM AND FUNCTIONS OF THE YOUNG COMMUNIST LEAGUE

Sennett: The west side was mainly a Jewish community. The YCL section included, however, the non-Jewish populated towns in the suburbs. Members were expected to be active in the union in anti-war or anti-Fascist work, in work with the unemployed, in fighting discrimination, especially discrimination against blacks, or generally in what was called mass work like Jewish organizations, the YWCA, et cetera. That meant taking up the issues of those times, trying to involve the widest number of people in movements to improve conditions in the neighborhoods, shops, and in the country, and educating people about the circumstances affecting their lives.

MW: Would we call that today consciousness-raising activities?

Sennett: We probably would, yes. The YCL functioned as a sort of junior part of the Communist party. The vanguard role was to be that carried out by the Communist party. That basically meant that the members of the Communist party (and of course of the Young Communist League) were those who understood better than non-Communists the direction that had to be taken to overcome the problems of the day and took the lead in organizing the working class and its allies to overthrow capitalism and establish a socialist society.

Basically, however, the difference between the Communist party and the Young Communist League was the age limitation. While there was no formal age restriction, it was generally considered that if you reached the age of twenty-six to twenty-eight you should "graduate" into the Communist party.

The young people, of course, in the Young Communist League were interested and involved in social events, and they were mostly of our own making. While the International Workers' Order

Sennett: youth section (to which I belonged) and other progressive fraternal or mass organizations would hold picnics, hikes, parties, dances, and sports activities, the Young Communist League also organized such social activities from time to time in its own name. We certainly didn't miss social opportunities because of our left political activities. To the contrary, I think, we had more of them than the average young person at that time. Although the Depression period and the rise of fascism were stressful times, we had an invigorating and happy social life and we were able to develop many close friendships as a result of our common commitment to a lifetime goal for a socialist society.

CLASS DISTINCTIONS IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE

Sennett: The most important work of the YCL was considered what was called industrial concentration. This was based on the concept of the leading role of the working class as the main factor in building a revolutionary movement which would lead to socialism. The concept was that there were two main classes in bourgeois society, the capitalist class and the working class. The farmers in the middle class, the professionals who were part of the middle class, and the intellectuals could be allies of the working class.

MW: Let me interrupt you for a moment. This was the terminology you remember using--the capitalist class and the working class, only two?

Sennett: That is correct.

MW: There wasn't the bourgeoisie, the aristocracy, the petit bourgeoisie--all of the other terms that we associate with Communist literature?

Sennett: They were used sometimes interchangeably. Bourgeoisie could be capitalist class. It was done in that manner. The working class--some people dropped the term class and called them working people.

The question of who was a member of the working class was once considered to be that the working class was really blue collar and some people considered that people who were office workers were really not the working class. The basic working class, of course, was blue collar. They worked in basic industry like the steel industry, the auto industry, the electrical industry, and coal mining. That was basic working class. Of course, a basic worker was considered the most important kind of Communist that one could be.

MW: So was this also thought of as the oppressors and the oppressed; that is, that everybody who was in the capitalist class was part of the oppressing mechanism?

Sennett: That's true.

MW: Did you include all white-collar workers in that?

Sennett: No, they were not. The white-collar workers were considered workers. However, they were not considered basic workers who were going to be primarily the key elements who would make it possible to change society.

MW: So you broke down working class into basic workers and other workers.

Sennett: That's right. There were service workers as well who were part of the working class.

MW: Did you have a lot of discussion about those theoretical questions of how do you define the class, who is in the class, who is not in the class, which are the progressive forces in the society? Was there a lot of intellectual discussion about this class analysis approach?

Sennett: Yes, there was and, of course, the class analysis was the basic determining factor for what goes on in society. It was commonly said, and it is said even by the Communist party to this date, that when one analyzes a situation, one has to take a class point of view; that is, one cannot simply deal with objective conditions per se. You have to analyze it from the point of view of the working class: Where does the working class stand in relation to the material that is being discussed and where does the capitalist class or the bourgeoisie stand? Who benefits and who is hurt by the decision that is going to be made about a particular matter?

MW: Did this boil down in your mind, or in the minds of the people you worked with at that time, into a simple analysis which said: There is the capitalist class and the working class, and the capitalist class are the bad guys, and the working class are the good guys, and we have to struggle to overcome their domination and build a socialist society? Was that essentially all there was to the analysis for most people?

Sennett: Well, that is an oversimplified kind of version in which you generally said what is good for the working class is bad for the capitalist class and vice versa. But in actuality, an attempt was made to go beyond that and the whole question of a class analysis developed out of a basic study of Marxism. Certainly, Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels proved that society was divided



Above: Chicago delegation to Young Communist League convention. Second and third from left foreground: Bill Sennett and Augusta "Gussie" Machen Sennett. New York, 1939.



Below: Chicago civil rights demonstration. Left to right: Cliff Johnson, CIO organizer; Bill Sennett; Gil Green, chairman of Illinois Communist party.

Sennett: into classes, so that it was not superficial. It was an actual state of affairs, the class concept being the relationship of people to production, and that relationship is certainly a real one to this day.

MW: I was curious about this from the point of view of how intellectual was the movement, how thoroughly indoctrinated were the people you associated with in the basic, theoretical analysis of the Marxist-Leninist movement internationally? Was there a heavy intellectual content to this? For example, did the movement attract many university students, who carried on intellectual discussions familiar in left-wing movements today?

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Sennett: We not only had university students, there were Young Communist League branches at a number of universities. I remember that there was a group in '37 or '38, at the University of Chicago with as many as fifty members. The university students were not the only ones who contributed to the intellectual and theoretical discussions. A number of workers and other non-intellectuals became Marxist teachers or politically knowledgeable people.

MARXIST THEORY AT THE WORKERS' SCHOOL

Sennett: The Communist party organized an ongoing "workers' school" in Chicago in the thirties. There was a continual effort made to get as many people as possible to take various kinds of classes in Marxism at that school. Later on, I became a once-a-week teacher in that school, and many of the other people like me, who were functionaries of the Communist party or Young Communist League, taught classes there. A formal university education was certainly not the basic requirement for teachers in Marxism.

The level of discussion, as I mentioned earlier, depended upon the level of participation and leadership. When you got down to clubs and branches, the level of discussion may or may not have been as deep or as penetrating as perhaps the level of discussions that took place at a higher leadership level.

MW: During this period was the university a kind of focus of radical activity as it became in the sixties?

Sennett: No, it was not.

MW: Were there university professors who were known as radicals who became leadership figures in the leftist movement?

Sennett: I don't recall any, and I know that there were some. But in those days, there were people who were university professors who were sympathetic with Marxism who did not make that matter known.

MW: Because of the danger of--

Sennett: --Of their jobs. Of course, the highlight of the kind of discrimination that took place against people who were accused of being Communists was in the McCarthy period, but even in the thirties it was not too safe to be known as a Marxist or a Communist.

THE INDUSTRIAL CONCENTRATION APPROACH TO UNION ORGANIZING

MW: Before we leave this theoretical business, you made reference to the concept of industrial concentration.

Sennett: Yes, I wanted to relate that to the concentration that we, the Young Communist League on the west side, undertook with a plant that was located in Cicero, the Western Electric Plant. This plant was mainly manufacturing telephone instruments and there were, as I recall, at that time between eight and ten thousand workers at different times employed in that plant, even during the Depression. It was a large plant. It was a plant which made electrical equipment and it was considered an important concentration point. It had a history of Communist efforts, Communist work, which went back even to the late twenties. But the Communists were, in the main, unable to organize any significant movement in the plant, either for a union or for the Communist party.

The concentration that we conducted, and we called it concentration, meant that we would give priority to doing work at that plant over and above any activity. That would be the most important work that our section had to do. What we did was to cooperate with the people who were Communists working inside the plant and with the people, members of the Communist party, who were also assigned to work outside the plant. Inside the plant, of course, Communist members were trying to organize a union.

The Communists worked together with other forces to encourage such union organization and to press certain immediate demands for improved conditions. Though wages were low, layoffs were arbitrary and speed-up was rife. The company, Western Electric, had very cleverly set up an independent employees' association, which the company controlled. This was commonly known as a company union. They provided social and sports facilities and activities and took a somewhat paternalistic approach to their

Sennett: workers. This proved to be very successful in dividing the workers and keeping a legitimate union organization from growing or from gaining a foothold in the Western Electric plant.

Together with the Communist party, we on the outside held "shop gate"--open air meetings during which we made speeches. I spoke a number of times at the Western Electric plant gates. This we did during the lunch hour at selected gates around the company plant. We passed our leaflets, we sold copies of the Daily Worker and the Weekly Worker. Sometimes we gave away sample copies. In addition to that, there was a Young Communist League paper, which we sold, called the the Young Worker.

I tried to get work in basic industry myself. I tried Western Electric, the steel mills, electrical plants, and the Chicago stockyards, which was a large industry at that time concentrated in the city.

MW: You couldn't get a job because there weren't any jobs or because somebody had your number as a dangerous agitator?

Sennett: Well, it was a little of both. I was not offered a job in many places, even before my application was examined, before they could investigate who I was. So I didn't get jobs because of so many people looking for too few jobs. In some places, when I filled out an application it was conceivable that I wasn't hired because I was known under my own name as a Communist. Therefore, in many instances I used aliases in order to try to get in, so that if they did check my references, I would have references to buttress my application.

Since I needed a job in any case, I was finally successful in getting one at Spiegel, May, Stern, which was a large merchandising mail-order house in Chicago. There were a number of openings in this mail-order house because they were developing a growing business that had a special appeal during the Depression. They had economical clothing to sell below what one would pay for that type of clothing in existing retail stores.

I don't recall whether I used my name, Sennett, or another name in order to hold onto that job, but it's conceivable that I may have worked under another name. Of course, those of us working there--five, as I recall--who were members of the Young Communist League immediately got together to discuss the need to unionize the company. We decided to look for other pro-union people and soon had a small group of about twenty interested people in Spiegel who agreed that they would help to build a union organization there.

Sennett: The CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] was not yet in existence at that time. This was 1935. So we contacted the more conservative American Federation of Labor, and their Chicago office agreed to charter a federal local for us. The federal local was a miscellaneous body of people who were in a union but not affiliated directly with any specific craft union. They said that they would charter us, however, if we brought in signed memberships from a hundred and fifty Spiegel employees. Our organizing committee began the solicitation of memberships, and within a short period of time, we had gotten cards from about a hundred people who indicated that they would be interested in joining a union. We held meetings with these people every week and invited new members to come to the meetings just as soon as they signed cards. This was also done because we attempted to involve the new members in becoming organizers for the union with us.

COMPANY RETALIATION

Sennett: Unfortunately, management infiltrated our ranks with informers who reported on our efforts. As a result, the company acted very swiftly and discharged the entire organizing committee, plus every member who had signed up to join the union! We contacted our members and found that they were all thrown out of their jobs. Though the company announced that the firings were layoffs, it was clear that this was an anti-union move and in violation of the decisions of the newly created National Labor Relations Board, which held that employers could not discharge or discriminate against employees because of union membership or union activities.

Our Spiegel organizing committee, therefore, met with the American Federation of Labor officials who had agreed to allow us to organize and said that they would charter us as a federal local. We reported what had happened. We asked them to take action, legal action, in our behalf to make an appeal to the National Labor Relations Board. They declined to do this. They said that it was highly unlikely that they could do anything about it because we were not legally a union and this was so because we had not received our federal charter. They used flimsy technical grounds to deny giving us any help. We were not yet a bona fide local and so we had no standing, they said, and the AF of L would not take our case.

We were convinced at that time that either the company, the Chicago police Red Squad, which kept tabs on Communists and others whom they considered Communists, or the FBI had contacted the AF of L. We were certain that that could have been the case. The

Sennett: AF of L was bitterly anti-Communist and they obviously were not going to help any people who were Communists to get into the American Federation of Labor. [tape interruption]

One week after I was fired, two Spiegel private detectives broke into my home. It was early in the evening, and I was away at a meeting. My wife was at home as was our then-boarder and friend, Vicki Kramer. The men claimed they were police and asked to see me. When my wife informed them that I was not in, they said that they would wait until I got home. Then they said that they were going to take Gussie and Vicki to the police station for questioning. Gussie was in her pajamas and she tried to slip out the front door, but the men grabbed her, tearing her pajama top off her back. Gussie then asked them to let her get dressed before leaving. She went into the bathroom, which had a window to an outside porch. She flushed the toilet, opened the window, climbed out on the porch and ran to a neighbor's apartment to warn me to stay away. The intruders suddenly realized that Gussie had slipped out and started looking through dresser drawers and in nooks and crannies, apparently for lists of additional union members' names. They finally gave up, took Vicki outside forcibly, brought her to a waiting car where two other men were sitting. It obviously was not a police car, and Vicki noted that there were baseball bats and brass knuckles in a box on the floor in the rear of the car. After threatening to beat her up, they released her and drove off.

With Gussie's help, I was able to get a job in the service department of the Hurley Machine Company.

MW: Let me stop you for a second. All of this that you are telling me now is based on what Gussie told you or what Vicki told you?

Sennett: What Gussie and Vicki told me.

MW: How do you know these were private detectives?

Sennett: It was circumstantial evidence. First of all, the car was unmarked. Secondly, Vicki clearly said she saw brass knuckles and baseball bats in the car. They ransacked the drawer, they did not have a search warrant, and there were no signs that they were police. They didn't show any identification.

MW: Did you report this to the police?

Sennett: Yes, but we got nowhere. They said we had no proof.

MW: Nothing ever came of it?

Sennett: Like a lot of things in those days, nothing much ever came out of any reports to the police where Communists made representations. With Gussie's help I was able to get a job in the Hurley Machine Company. Hurley manufactured Thor washing machines, and Gussie was then the secretary to the manager of rental machines used in apartment buildings. Since married women were not hired at Hurley at that time, Gussie was working under her maiden name of Machen. She introduced me as her brother. I was hired to become a washing machine service man, and I started work under the name of William Machen. I have never been the handiest man with tools, but after a three-week training period, I was sent out to work on my own.

This was the period of the old agitator-type washers with wringer attachments. For the sake of expediency, wringers were to be replaced if they were not in operating order and then the factory would do the overhauling as needed. Service men generally carried spare wringers along with them for replacements. One day I had to replace two wringers and had only one spare. I would, therefore, have to be back with a serviceable wringer the next day. I was due to make two emergency calls in the neighborhood far from the plant the next morning and I was told by my service manager not to bring the wringers back into the shop, but to go right out on the job the next morning.

I was puzzled as to what to do, but since I had a wringer which was defective in the car, I thought that I would bring it in and try to repair it that night and put it back on the machine so that that machine which needed the wringer could go back into operation. I tried fix the broken wringer and couldn't figure it out. Gussie, who was much better than I about things mechanical and knew all the parts that were needed to make a wringer work, put it all together for me and I had the replacement ready for the next day's call.

IV Civil War in Spain

[Interview 3: August 17, 1981]##

MW: This session will deal with the war in Spain. Bill, when did you first become aware of the war in Spain and how did you learn about it?

Sennett: I was particularly interested in the developments in Spain as a result of the election victory of the Popular Front in February 1936. Shortly thereafter there was a rebellion against the legally elected government in July 1936.

MW: Did you read about it in the newspapers generally or did you read it in Communist party papers?

Sennett: I read about it in the commercial press first.

MW: Did you make judgments about the war on the basis of your own analysis of what was happening, or did you get a party line on it?

Sennett: Obviously, I was involved in discussions held by the YCL and Communist party dealing with those events. There was no denying that fascism had attacked the Spanish Republic.

MW: Had Spain had any significance to you before the war?

Sennett: Only in the sense that the monarchy was toppled in 1931 and that a Popular Front uniting the liberals and the left was being forged.

MW: During this period you were very active in trade union activities and other kinds of political activity in the United States. How well were you able to inform yourself about international affairs?

Sennett: There was always a lot of reading and discussions about international developments, especially with the rise of Hitler. The assumption of power by the German Nazis in 1933 was a frightening

Sennett: event that helped me understand that an even greater danger than America's internal difficulties threatened the American people. I accepted the thesis of the Communist International that fascism was the open terrorist rule by the capitalist class and that it would lead to the wiping out of all vestiges of bourgeois democracy, the destruction of the labor movement, and government sanction of the persecution of the Jews. I accepted the judgment of the Communist movement that the spread of fascism would lead to a new imperialist world war.

MW: This was a political judgment based on your analysis of fascism and wasn't primarily related to Hitler's attitude toward the Jews, although that was a factor?

Sennett: That was a factor. Obviously, Hitler's anti-Semitic propaganda and attacks against Jews even before coming to power were ominous. I lived in a Jewish neighborhood and as a Jew I was very conscious of that. The Communists generally undertook to alert Americans to the danger of fascism and to war, both in our country and abroad, in addition to dealing with such domestic issues as unemployment, and trade union organization and discrimination against blacks. We were taught that internationalism was a basic element necessary to bring about a peaceful world. The YCL, the Communist party, and other left organizations issued anti-Fascist and antiwar pamphlets and leaflets. There were street-corner meetings, demonstrations, and mass meetings. This was an ongoing process to alert Americans. There were also picket lines in front of the German, Japanese, and Italian embassies and consulates around the country. And we helped to organize broader based non-Communist movements for peace and democracy.

MW: Why the Japanese at this stage?

Sennett: The Japanese, in 1931, had invaded Manchuria. The matter of Japanese militarism and imperialism was high on our activity agenda. I remember that one of the earliest boycotts in the early thirties was one launched in this country. This campaign, initiated by the left, led to a movement that women would not wear silk stockings, since silk was being processed in Japan and sold in the United States.

MW: So the main ideological thread that ran through all of this was anti-imperialism?

Sennett: Yes, certainly. Imperialism was considered to be those advanced capitalist countries who owned colonies or dominated and controlled the markets and economics of the less developed countries of the world.

MW: At that stage had you read Lenin's famous pamphlet: Imperialism; The Highest Stage of Capitalism?

Sennett: By the time the war in Spain broke out, I had, yes. I had attended an earlier training school in the Communist party and had been involved in classes, discussions, and lectures on the subject.

MW: If you had been asked at that time to define imperialism, would you have been able to give a good definition?

Sennett: I think so. I looked on our country as an imperialist country, though it had very few colonies. It was the wealthiest nation in the world after World War I and it fitted Lenin's characterization of the elements that make up imperialism.

MW: Let's go back to the Spanish Civil War now in general. Can you describe the first active involvement in the Spanish war which ultimately led to the international brigades and your participation in them?

Sennett: The Spanish Civil War broke out on July 18, 1936. It was a revolt of the generals supported by more than 90 percent of the military forces in Spain, and it was materially backed and encouraged by Germany and Italy. The legally elected Popular Front government had the majority of people on their side but the reactionary generals expected to overwhelm the republic with their control of the armed forces and their superior military strength.

MW: Do you remember how they got started? I know you subsequently had a good deal of the historical literature about the period, but I am wondering what you knew at the time about how the international brigade started.

Sennett: The international brigades began to take shape after volunteers from other countries joined with the Loyalists to defend the Republic. Anti-Fascists around the world recognized that this was more than a civil war and the brigades were constituted as an organized body starting with the defense of Madrid in October of 1936.

MW: So you didn't know about them until actually they had come into existence? You didn't know about the representations between Maurice Thorez* with the Comintern** to put these things together?

Sennett: No, not at this time.

*General secretary of the Communist party of France.

**Communist International.

RECRUITING FOR THE INTERNATIONAL BRIGADES

MW: Tell us about the recruiting for the brigades in the United States.

Sennett: My recollection is that I was approached by a Young Communist League leader, Irving Herman, who was assigned by the organization to help recruit volunteers to go to Spain. Herman was based in Chicago and he asked me to help him recruit volunteers. I was to talk to people who might be interested. I was not to bring any pressure to bear, as this was going to be a voluntary matter on the part of the individual, and not a Young Communist League decision for them. I agreed to help locate volunteers from among the members of the Young Communist League or those who were sympathizers.

MW: Now, you started recruiting others before you made the decision to go yourself?

Sennett: I think I decided to be my own first volunteer. I was convinced about the importance of going and thought it would be best to recruit others if it were known that I, too, was going to go.

MW: Tell me about your thoughts about deciding to go. What, as you remember them, were your primary motivations? Was it a sense of duty to the cause or was it a desire for personal adventure? What was the attitude of Gussie and others toward this?

Sennett: It was a combination of those thoughts. My own decision was based mainly on my political conviction that it was necessary to defeat Fascists in Spain to halt the further spread of fascism in the world. I was excited because I felt that I would have a personal opportunity to participate. I was also excited about the adventure, the thrill of going there, the direct action involved in striking out against fascism. Gussie was very passive about it and generally would defer to my political reasoning about why something needed to be done. She did not try to dissuade me from going.

MW: Did anybody try to talk you out of it?

Sennett: I had a few friends who talked to me about the fact that I would be more useful in the United States. I didn't agree with that. They put it on that basis, even though it was obvious that they were telling me that you could get killed if you went.

MW: All of these discussions were essentially political discussions; that is, the reasons for going or not going were all political reasons, not so much that you might get killed, or that there could be personal reasons. Everything had to be justified in political terms.

Sennett: That's true. I didn't dwell then on the possibility of getting killed. That's something that comes later, once one is actually involved in action. I thought them through and in my own mind, of course, I said that the reason that I wanted to go was that I believed in the cause for which the struggle was being fought and I could help.

MW: Did you have a realistic notion of what you were getting into?

Sennett: No, I really didn't.

MW: Did anybody?

Sennett: I think some people may have, perhaps those who were a little more mature than I. But basically there is quite a difference, as I learned when I got to Spain, between the experience and the thought about what the experience would be like.

MW: This is jumping ahead a little bit, but at any time did you have any regrets about having made the decision to go?

Sennett: I have never looked upon them as regrets. I looked upon them as just having feelings, some of them which should be dampened--for example, feelings of fear and feelings about death when one is under attack. I never thought them through from the point of view of whether it be better if I were home, but obviously I would have been more comfortable and felt a lot safer if I was back home.

MW: But never at any time did you have any notion that you had made some kind of colossal mistake and you wished you could figure out some way to undo it?

Sennett: There were times when that crossed my mind. I even rationalized it politically. I would think, "Gee, maybe some of my friends at home were right or perhaps I could have been more useful by staying home." Then I would think of some people in the YCL leadership who did not go and I would ask myself, "Why didn't they volunteer?" Those thoughts did race through my mind.

JOINING THE INTERNATIONAL BRIGADES

- MW: Okay, you decided to go and then what were the steps that you had to take once you made the decision to go?
- Sennett: I got a cursory physical examination in Chicago. I applied for a passport to go to France and after receiving it, I left for New York by bus with several others. This was in January, 1937. I met with the Communist party and YCL people who were in charge of working out the logistics for the trip. Two people I particularly remember who were coordinating the venture were Ed Bender and Bill Lawrence of New York.
- MW: Did you have to get any kind of official sanction from the organizations you were working with at that time to go? Did you have to be released from your duties or anything like that?
- Sennett: Oh, yes. There were other people who wanted to go--YCLers and members of the party, who did not get such permission. We had to get the approval of the organization in order to leave.
- MW: Was there a lot of secrecy involved in all of this in order that the authorities not know who was going or make any effort to stop you?
- Sennett: There was an attempt at secrecy but, after all, if you are talking to as many people as those of us who were recruiting did, word was bound to get around. So I am sure it was pretty common knowledge and that the FBI knew about it.
- MW: Was there any evidence that there were official efforts to sabotage the operation in any way?
- Sennett: No, not overtly. I am sure, although I am not clear in my mind who those people would be today, that the FBI undoubtedly had some people infiltrate and become volunteers themselves.
- MW: And went to Spain?
- Sennett: Yes, they did.
- MW: So you are pretty sure that the American government was well-informed about the whole operation from beginning to end?
- Sennett: I think so.
- MW: Did you know that at the time or feel that it was likely?

Sennett: No, I did not know but I suspected as much. I was not thinking along those lines, and it apparently didn't matter very much because there were no legal obstacles put in our way, with the exception that at that time the passports were issued they were stamped "not valid in Spain."

MW: The impression I get from the way you describe all of these events and some of the earlier period was that you were not really operating very much as a conspirator, hiding very much from the law, or using conspiratorial techniques to stay out of the sight of the law. It looked to me like this activity and the other things you did were pretty much in the open, and the authorities wouldn't have much difficulty in finding out exactly who was doing what. Is that true?

Sennett: I think that is true generally. I think that, after all, if there had not been a nonintervention committee, and America had not participated in that sham, and if the passports--

MW: Maybe you ought to say what the nonintervention committee was.

Sennett: The nonintervention committee was set up by the League of Nations in order to ostensibly keep other nations from intervening on either side in the civil war in Spain. This was a committee of governments. They set up in some respect blockades, they closed the frontiers with Spain, and they were supposed to prevent shipments of war materiel, even though the Spanish Republic was the legally constituted government and had certain international rights in acquiring war materiel. In actuality it was supposed to be an effort to keep the Fascists from intervening on the side of the Franco regime and the democracies from participating or giving any aid to the other side.

MW: But your conclusion was that, in effect, it really worked the other way?

Sennett: It certainly did. The Loyalist government from the very beginning took defensive measures and called upon volunteers to participate to counteract the direct intervention by Germany and Italy in behalf of Franco. The volunteers offered their services first and the Republic accepted them with open arms. But at all times the Loyalist government contrasted the volunteers who fought on their side with the actual regular German and Italian military forces who fought on the rebel side. And the government called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces fighting in Spain.

MW: Now, you brought this up in connection with my questions about secrecy and the conspiratorial approach to politics and so forth. You say that everyone knew that the nonintervention committee was

MW: a sham. Are you saying in effect that there was no need for secrecy because no one was really taking nonintervention seriously and the American government didn't care whether Americans were getting involved or not?

Sennett: I don't see how secrecy in terms of people going to Spain would have been possible. You didn't want to announce that fact, although the Socialist party in the United States organized or called for the organization of the Debs Brigade and openly advertised for volunteers to go to Spain.

MW: I wanted to get that straight because the image in much of the literature about Communism is that it is a highly conspiratorial, secret kind of operation. You didn't encounter that then, but on the other hand, you weren't really in the top councils of the American Communist party at this time either. You were YCL and you were not really a full-fledged Communist, right?

Sennett: Those YCLers who were not yet members of the Communist party were not part of the organization. The basic decision maker was the parent organization and they set the political line. The YCL, however, in practice was a junior Communist party.

MW: I would like your comments on some of the popular notions and some of the stereotypes about Communist activity during this period. I would imagine that some people would say that you in effect were kind of a young naive pawn of a group of conspirators who were manipulating on an international scale in this event of the intervention in Spain.

Sennett: I certainly was far less naive than those who weren't involved in political work. After all, even though I may have pursued some wrong policies, my motivation was based upon whatever I could read, whatever I could learn, whatever I could research. I did a lot more homework with respect to what was going on in my country and abroad than most nonconcerned individuals.

MW: So you went to New York and met the people who were in charge of putting together the American contingent. Was this trip to New York the first stage in the trip of Spain? Did you go then from New York on to Spain or what was after that?

Sennett: I met with an attorney in New York who was a volunteer named Bernard Addes. We were to work to expedite and coordinate the movement of volunteers aboard the ship that we were going to take to get to France on our way to Spain. It turned out that this ship was the Ile de France and we were going to have the largest contingent of volunteers that had gone across to date.

MW: The Ile de France was a great luxury liner.

Sennett: Yes, it was.

MW: That's pretty stylish transit for radicals going to war!

Sennett: It was stylish, but we went third class. It was better than steerage in any case. Bernard Addes and I were taken by Bill Lawrence to meet with Earl Browder.

TAKING CHARGE OF VOLUNTEERS ABOARD THE ILE DE FRANCE

MW: Let me interrupt just a second, Bill. Were you in a leadership role at this point? Why did they take you?

Sennett: I don't know. When I go to New York, I was introduced to Bernard Addes and I was told that he and I had been selected to see that the volunteers aboard the Ile de France got to Paris. I was a section organizer of the YCL and apparently I had been recommended based on my credentials established in Chicago.

MW: So you were in charge then of some men at this point?

Sennett: Not until we were aboard ship.

MW: But it was clear that you were going to be put in charge as a result of these meetings?

Sennett: Yes.

MW: How many men would you then be in charge of?

Sennett: Bernard Addes and I would then be the co-captains of the group of volunteers aboard ship--some two hundred and fifty as it turned out.

MW: Was this the first contingent to go?

Sennett: No, it was not. There were earlier contingents that went. Some Americans individually went to Spain even in December of 1936. The larger and more organized numbers started to go in January of 1937, and we were on our way in early February.

MW: So they had some experience then in moving these people through New York by this time.

Sennett: Yes, they did. There had been a number of groups who had gone earlier.

MW: But this was probably the largest group up to that point?

Sennett: This was the largest not only up to that point, but in the whole American experience of volunteers who left for Spain.

MW: This was really the peak of the U.S. effort in that regard.

Sennett: It was as far as numbers aboard one ship.

MW: Okay, you started to tell me about this visit to Earl Browder.

Sennett: I was brought together with Bernard Addes to meet Earl Browder in the Communist party national office. He was the general secretary of the party. He spoke to us somewhat about our trip and our mission and wished us bon voyage and praised us for volunteering and told us to pass on his good wishes to the rest of the men through those with whom we would be working. We were provided two small pieces of cloth on which were typed a small message of introduction addressed to Maurice Thorez who was the French Communist party secretary. The introductory message was signed, E.B., the initials of Earl Browder.

MW: Do you remember the text of the message? Was it in English or French?

Sennett: It was in English, yes. It was simply, as I recall, a one-sentence message to the extent that Bernard Addes and I were bringing across a representative group of volunteers, signed, Earl Browder.

MW: Not everyone in the contingent had one of these. It was only you and Addes that had one of these?

Sennett: We were given this introduction in behalf of all the men.

MW: It was just a small piece of cloth? How big?

Sennett: I would say that it was probably about two inches square. Bill Lawrence suggested that we pin the message on the inside flap of our trouser "flies" which seemed to be a pretty safe place. Then we were to hand this to a representative who would contact us from the international brigades as part of the coordinating committee in Paris.

MW: You didn't save that, did you, as a souvenir?

Sennett: No, we gave it up. We had to give it up.

MW: It sounds to me like a device which is not very impressive as an identification device.

Sennett: No, it certainly wasn't! I didn't think of it at that time. I didn't know whether the fly was the most secure place in any case!

MW: Tell me about Earl Browder. Was this simply a perfunctory meeting in which he sort of gave you his blessing or were there some serious matters discussed, details of logistics or political matters or instructions of that nature?

Sennett: No, nothing at all. It was more in the nature of a courtesy meeting on behalf of the Communist party. We all had great respect for Earl Browder, who was the outstanding leader of the Communist party of the United States, so it was a thrill--

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MW: I was asking you of your impressions about Earl Browder.

Sennett: Actually, he didn't spend very much time with us. There was a meeting that was going on when Addes and I were brought up to see him. He had excused himself from the meeting and wanted to talk to us without the other people being involved. I don't think he spent more than ten minutes with us.

MW: So you didn't really have an opportunity to gain much of a notion of what he was like?

Sennett: No.

MW: At least you weren't disappointed in any way.

Sennett: No, not at that time.

MW: So then you got the identification and you got on the boat. What was the boat trip like?

Sennett: The ship was a fast luxury liner, we learned. It was going to make the trip a matter of five days. Bernard Addes and I were given some money, which we divided up between us. This was to be given to the men as they might need it before they docked. To keep in daily touch with the men on the ship, we divided them up into six groups, the two hundred and fifty, and we had a section leader for each one of the groups. The six section leaders were to report to Addes and myself each day on the situation among the men and whether there were any problems that had arisen. I recall the names of four out of the six: Sam Gontshak, Lou Ornitz, Dave Engels, and Harold Smith.

MW: Now, these are the only names of all of the two hundred fifty that you remember in your section?

Sennett: No, these men were the section liaison people.

MW: They were the section leaders?

MW: Yes. I knew a number of other men but unfortunately I didn't get to know too many as I had a small problem of seasickness that lasted for four out of the five days of that trip. I was in the bunk most of the time--I was miserable--and we had meetings with our section leaders who came to my bunk with Addes when I was immobilized.

MW: Did the men have any responsibilities on the ship other than to just stay out of trouble or did they have to do some training or did you have political meetings or anything like that?

Sennett: No, we weren't going to have any kind of political meetings. We were told to have everyone pose as tourists and not to cluster in any large groups and not to attract attention to themselves but enjoy whatever amenities they could in third class. We happened to have one of our group, Irving Goff, a gymnast, who practiced his art aboard ship and attracted some attention. We suggested that his performances cease and that he undertake more private forms of recreation.

MW: Do you think that other passengers on the ship knew that there was this large contingent of volunteers for Spain aboard?

Sennett: Word did get around but at least it was formally a secret. There were suspicions reported to us about informers but nothing we could pin down. I would guess that the American officials knew the real intent of our journey.

MW: Was third class unpleasant or was it fairly decent on a ship like the Ile de France?

Sennett: Oh, I thought it was quite decent. We went up to look at first class to see how the rich traveled.

MW: Did you have any problem with the men fraternizing with other passengers or did you tell them not to? Posing as tourists they would have to.

Sennett: Oh, yes, they would. They were playing cards, shuffleboard, and whatever other games were available and talking to people. We tried to keep them from getting involved in political discussions.

MW: Were there any discipline problems?

Sennett: There were a few. There were reports and I can't remember what they were. They could not have been very serious.

BILLETING THE INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERS IN PARIS

MW: So then the voyage was successful and you disembarked in France?

Sennett: Yes, we got to Le Havre and we took the train from Le Havre to Paris and connected up with the international brigade coordinating and processing center. That's where we met volunteers from many other countries, and we were all warmly welcomed and looked after by the French. There were no mass meetings or demonstrations. They tried to keep it low key.

MW: Tell me about the language problem. Did any of you speak French?

Sennett: Some did.

MW: Did you or Addes speak French?

Sennett: No, neither of us did. There were always enough people who were either speaking English or translators around to take care of that problem.

MW: So there was no really serious language difficulty?

Sennett: No, and in fact one of our group who came over with us on the boat was John Murra, an anthropology student who spoke six languages. He was very helpful and, in fact, was even kept behind to work with the Paris committee after our whole group was shipped off to Spain. John was a YCL member at the University of Chicago.

MW: Can you tell me anything more about the Paris committee, your impressions of their efficiency and how well organized the operation was? Did you get the impression that this was a smoothly running operation by people who knew what they were doing, or was there an enormous amount of chaos and confusion?

Sennett: I was very impressed with the operation. I thought that they were doing an excellent job. They had to feed us, house us, line us up to move out, and make our next connection in order to get us into Spain. I was thrilled to be in Paris under those circumstances with that group of people. After all, the people were like-minded politically and it was my first experience out of the country.

MW: How were you billeted?

Sennett: We were put up in various hotels.

MW: You didn't stay with French families?

Sennett: Some people stayed with French families, and some people stayed in hotels.

MW: The French picked up the tab for the hotel?

Sennett: They must have. I don't recall.

MW: You people didn't pay for it out of the money that you had?

Sennett: No, we didn't. The committee took care of all of the financial needs of the people once we got there.

MW: How many days were you in Paris?

Sennett: I personally was in Paris for ten days and I think that will give you an idea about how efficient it was because I stayed until the last person was processed from our group of two hundred and fifty, and in addition to the two hundred and fifty there were other volunteers coming from other countries.

MW: What did processing consist of?

Sennett: For some, at least, processing consisted of another perfunctory physical exam. It consisted of making sure that you had clothing to walk across the Pyrenees, which we did, and it consisted of simply keeping track of people so that they could be organized into groups to take off.

MW: It wasn't a question of military training, security checks, issuing of papers, developing files or anything like that?

Sennett: Not at all.

MW: Did they develop dossiers on all of these people?

Sennett: I am not sure about that. I think they did and, in fact, that's where the passports were picked up and kept for the people who went into Spain.

MW: The American passports?

Sennett: The American passports; I know that I recall I did not take my passport into Spain.

MW: So did you have any papers at all?

Sennett: Yes, they gave us some temporary identification paper. I don't recall what the paper looked like.

MW: It wasn't called a laissez-passer or something like that?

Sennett: I don't think so.

MW: Was it a French government paper?

Sennett: No, it was certainly not a French government paper. These were papers that were provided by the committee.

MW: So then you had no government papers at all of any kind after you turned in your passports in Paris.

Sennett: That is correct.

MW: In effect then, you were violating French law from that time on, weren't you, traveling around without papers?

Sennett: We probably did, but I never thought of it at that particular time.

MW: Did you get any impression from your comrades in France that the French government looked favorably or unfavorably on all of this?

Sennett: The French government, which at that time was headed by Leon Blum, the Socialist, was friendly but not openly.

MW: This was the Popular Front government?

Sennett: Yes.

MW: Were there Communists in the government at that time?

Sennett: I don't think so. It was 1937 and I am not certain. But the French government at that time took the position--in fact, the Communists criticized them--that they were supporting the nonintervention agreement. Blum, being a Socialist, obviously caught a lot of flack from the left. However, it seemed to me that they generally winked at the volunteers who were being processed to go to Spain.

MW: So once again, there wasn't any sense of this being an underground type of activity that you had to be really careful and hide from the authorities? You were operating pretty much as tourists and that you weren't in any danger of being arrested and thrown into a French jail?

Sennett: Oh no, in fact for the time we were there, even though people were told to be careful and not be conspicuous, I know a lot of guys went to French nightclubs and whorehouses and generally went out on the town.

MW: By the way, one other question on the physical examination. As far as you know, nobody got turned down for physical reasons?

Sennett: Yes, there were some. I'm not sure who they were by name, but there were some people who were turned down. After all, they had already gone through a physical or at least they were supposed to have gone through a physical in their home cities or in New York before they went to Spain. But there were a few people who were kept back in Paris for physical reasons. And there were a few who couldn't make it climbing the Pyrenees who were sent home.

MW: What happened to them?

Sennett: I don't know.

MW: By a few--do you have any notion of how many out of the two hundred and fifty from your ship?

Sennett: Not very many. I can only recall one person and I don't even recall his name.

MW: Did the organization which you developed on the ship--that is, the sections--did that continue after Paris or was there a new organizational structure?

Sennett: No, that ended with our being "delivered" to the processing center.

TREKKING ACROSS THE PYRENEES TO SPAIN

MW: From then on, people were sent in small groups?

Sennett: Yes, there were groups of five or six. My own group of six went to Perpignan. We met our contacts for the next stage into Spain at a soccer game.

MW: These were Spanish contacts?

Sennett: These were French contacts. The French contacts then took us to the Spanish border by bus, and it was then that we met some friendly gendarmes who knew where we were going. They gave us a quick, silent Popular Front salute--a clenched fist raised above the head. The salute dates back to the French revolution. As the fingers are welded into a fist, so the masses are united for strength. As the fist is raised above the head, so are the interests of the masses raised above that of the individual.

MW: So you went through a border checkpoint then?

Sennett: We didn't go to the border checkpoint. We were in the French part away from the regular border crossing. We had to climb the mountains, the Pyrenees.

MW: You mentioned the gendarmes giving you the salute. You didn't mean the border gendarmes?

Sennett: No, they weren't border gendarmes, no. There was some obvious, formal efforts to close the border. Buses and cars were stopped at the border. Prior to reaching the border, we traveled unhindered by gendarmes. Perhaps they should have stopped the bus and checked us, but they didn't do that.

MW: I see, this was a bus not at the border, but heading in the direction of--

Sennett: Heading in the direction of the border.

MW: And the border was closed?

Sennett: That is correct.

MW: So then where did the bus go?

Sennett: The bus took us to a little town away from the border. I don't remember exactly where it was we started walking into the woods away from the road. It was at that point that we met our Spanish guides on the French side.

MW: How many of you were there?

Sennett: There were just five or six in our group. But there were other groups behind us.

MW: And you were all Americans? You weren't mixed in with any other nationalities going through Paris?

Sennett: Not in our group; not in my particular group of five or six.

MW: By the way, did you run into other nationalities going to Spain in Paris while you were there?

Sennett: Oh, yes, in the processing center we met many. All kinds of other national groups were represented in Paris.

MW: But when you were shipped out, you were shipped out with your own people in groups of five or six.

Sennett: Generally.

MW: There was no mixing them?

Sennett: No, our group of approximately two hundred and fifty was divided up into groups of five or six and it was generally with other Americans.

MW: Did you know exactly where you were going or were you just in their hands and you were going to end up where you were supposed to be without knowing?

Sennett: We knew we were going to have to walk across the Pyrenees, but we didn't know exactly where we were going. We had a French guide who was with the group throughout the trip on the French side, and then we were picked up by guides who came across the border from Spain to take us into that country.

MW: So the French guide took you to somewhere near the border in a remote area away from town. Do you know exactly where that was? Can you identify it?

Sennett: It was in the direction of Port Bou. [spells name] Port Bou is a French town on the border.

MW: So you were very near the Mediterranean coast?

Sennett: Right.

MW: Describe the actual border crossing and the transfer from the French guide to the Spanish guide.

Sennett: As I said, when we left Perpignan we were picked up at the soccer game by a prearranged decision by and between various French guides. Then they took us to a waiting bus with other groups of five or six. Then, however, we stopped at the roadside at a certain point near the border and we were brought to a spot somewhere in the woods for our hike up the mountain. It was at that point that we were met by Spanish guides.

MW: You were all in civilian clothes?

Sennett: Yes, we were. In fact, I remember I was wearing a topcoat. Since it was February, it was still cold and I started out with a topcoat. At least, I recall at that time that I had gotten some sturdy shoes because we knew we were going to climb the mountain.

- MW: Is this very precipitous, this mountain, at this point?
- WS: We climbed a mountain which goes to a height of eleven thousand feet. I had never climbed a mountain before. In fact, living in Chicago I hadn't climbed very many hills. So it was quite a physical trip for me to take.
- MW: Was there a train or were you simply going over a rough terrain?
- Sennett: We were just following the guide on foot. The Spanish guides, who climbed like goats, were taking us up the mountain. There was one guide for every group of five or six, and I don't recall how many groups there were spread in the mountains who were leaving at the same time.
- MW: Were they armed?
- Sennett: The guides? I didn't notice. I don't think so.
- MW: There wasn't a danger of any kind in that area at that time?
- Sennett: No. After all, when you got over to the Loyalist side you were in safe territory. So all you had to face were the French gendarmes, the border guards.
- MW: And as long as you were discreet, you really didn't expect any trouble from them.
- Sennett: No, we didn't. But we were told not to show our faces and we were told that there were certain gendarmes who were a lot more enthusiastic about enforcing the patrol of the border and that there were people who had been caught and arrested and sent back.
- MW: Did the border here run at the summit so that when you got to the summit you were on the other side, or did you have a long way to go before you cross the border?
- Sennett: As I recall, we started up the mountain when it got dark. We traveled from then until daylight broke again on our way down the Spanish side. So apparently it was about eleven or twelve hours before we ended our climb and descent.
- MW: Where did you end up?
- Sennett: We ended up in Spain on the other side and it was a lot easier going downhill.
- MW: How were you welcomed?

Sennett: We were met at some border checkpoint on the Spanish side by two border guards who embraced us and had hot coffee ready, welcoming us very warmly.

MW: Then what happened next?

Sennett: We were picked up by a truck and driven to Figueras. Figueras was approximately fifteen to twenty miles from the border. We were brought to an old fort in Figueras, and at that time I guess Figueras was a town of about eight to ten thousand. I didn't know it then, but I learned later that it was the birth place of Salvador Dali and, in fact, there is now a big museum in town celebrating Salvador Dali and housing much of his art.

TRUCK TRANSPORT DETAIL TO ALBACETE

Sennett: There we were immediately given a welcoming lecture and told what was expected in Figueras where we would again be processed and we would be further indoctrinated before being transported to the international brigades base in Albacete.

MW: Was this lecture in English?

Sennett: In English.

MW: Just for the five of you or were there others?

Sennett: There were hundreds of men in Figueras when we arrived and more were coming in daily.

MW: All Americans and other national groups were present as well.

Sennett: The Americans and the British, the English speaking, were grouped together to facilitate communication. There was one overall lecture in which there were many translations and then after that there was separation and we were able to relate to each other in English.

MW: Was there a lot of fraternization across national boundaries at this point? Did you meet people from other--

Sennett: There certainly was. We got the opportunity to try to speak where we could communicate with volunteers from other countries. We met men of many nationalities, and there were probably two dozen various tongues being spoken in Figueras.

MW: So you got the welcoming lecture and what happened then?

Sennett: We were told that we would be sent out of Figueras to Albacete and from there to our respective brigades. In the meantime, we were taken out the next day for drill and elementary maneuvers. The maneuvers were held over some rather hilly terrain and we were told a little bit about some of the battles that had taken place and something of what to expect in Spain in the way of air bombardments and trains, and artillery fire, until we got to the units wherever we were going to be assigned.

MW: Were these training lectures in effect?

Sennett: Yes, they were.

MW: You said maneuvers. Do you mean you were actually going through training--

Sennett: We were going through some perfunctory training exercises.

MW: Did you have uniforms at this point?

Sennett: No, we did not.

MW: Did you have weapons or anything?

Sennett: No, we did not.

MW: So you were basically all untrained, unequipped, unarmed.

Sennett: That's right. In Figueras, we noticed that a lot of new trucks were at the base. These were mainly English and French. They called them Matfords, the French Ford; the English trucks were Fordsons made in England. Apparently the government had made a deal with Ford in those two countries before the border closing. The trucks were sitting in Figueras awaiting orders for assignment. Several days after we had arrived at Figueras there was a call for volunteers to drive the trucks to the international base in Albacete, which was about 550 kilometers to the southwest. The idea was that these were going to be provided for the use of the international brigades and the Fifth Army Corps.

We were given a few days of training with the trucks. After all, most of us said that we could drive. Among Americans, there were more drivers than among the Europeans in those days, but most of us never drove trucks. We were given some preliminary instruction on handling the trucks, how to disperse, how to use camouflage if necessary, and what to do if the truck was attacked from the air or by artillery.

MW: Did the trucks have camouflage paint on them?

Sennett: Partially. They had, by that time, already had a canvas tarpaulin over a wooden frame and they were splotched in camouflage fashion.

MW: But these were basically civilian trucks, they weren't military trucks?

Sennett: Yes.

MW: How many wheels?

Sennett: These were, as I recall, about two and one-half- to five-ton trucks. They had two rear axles and one front axle with a total of six to ten wheels.

MW: Did you drive a truck?

Sennett: Yes, I did. About the only thing I had to learn was how to double clutch and how to drive without lights in the dark.

MW: So then did you drive the truck?

Sennett: I drove the truck along with a convoy from Figueras down the Mediterranean coast into Albacete. The total trip took several days.

MW: Was this a mountainous road or on the plains where you could move the truck off of the road?

Sennett: No, it was partly mountainous. It was especially mountainous around the coast through Catalonia, Barcelona, and on toward the road to Valencia.

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MW: Who was in charge of the convoy?

Sennett: I don't recall.

MW: But you were in Spanish hands at this time?

Sennett: Spanish and French.

THE REGIMENT DE TREN

MW: Then what happened? Did you finally get to your destination?



Above left: In camp on the outskirts of Madrid. Right: Bill Sennett. April 1937.



Above right: Loyalist soldiers moving up to mount trucks from the first Regiment de Tren.

Right: Town square after bombardment. Teruel, Spain, 1938.





Sennett: Yes, we did. We got to Albacete. Albacete was a pretty fair-sized town, probably even at that time, about seventy-five or eighty thousand people. It was the headquarters of the international brigades. We were taken to a place known as the auto park. This was a large facility built to be used as a truck terminal. It was a staging area for transportation equipment and groups that were being organized to provide trucks, ambulances, cars, and motorcycles for the international brigades as were needed, if equipment was available. Transportation equipment was very limited in supply.

We were then issued uniforms, shoes--a military outfit. We were put together with a number of other Americans in the auto park since, as I indicated earlier, there were more Americans in proportion to other nationalities as a result of the fact that more Americans were drivers. That's where the organization of the First Regiment de Tren, as it was called, took place.

MW: Is that a Spanish word?

Sennett: No, it is French. I think it's French. At least my recollection is that the French, who had preceded us at the auto park, had named the outfit the Regiment de Tren.

MW: What do you mean by outfit?

Sennett: The Regiment de Tren I call the outfit.

MW: But you weren't in that regiment until you got to Albacete.

Sennett: That is correct. We were volunteers as individuals carrying out a mission to deliver the equipment trucks to Albacete where the equipment would be assigned to existing military organizations.

MW: Then when you got there, you were assigned to the Regiment de Tren, which you thought was a French-organized outfit with French leadership.

Sennett: Correct.

MW: You don't know whether de Tren was the name of an individual or the name of a town in France?

Sennett: No, Regiment de Tren literally means--I don't know, but it means that it's a transportation regiment. That is the actual, practical word for Regiment de Tren. It was organized as a separate regiment and had expanded to two squadrons. A squadron was the smaller formation, the segmentation, and the regiment was the overall operation.

- MW: How many people were in the regiment?
- Sennett: The Regiment de Tren was different than the regiments at the front. We had at our peak a total of about two hundred fifty people in the whole regiment. When we Americans were added to the regiment, we were organized as the second squadron of that regiment.
- MW: Was this organization modeled after the Spanish army or after the French army or what? These are unusual words to use for groups of that size. For example, an American regiment is much larger than that regiment. You are talking about battalion size really.
- Sennett: Yes, the regiments in the military structure--that is, the infantry--are quite different. There is no comparison with the infantry in terms of numbers. Ours was based upon a certain number of trucks and the number of men it would take to handle those trucks. I'm not sure whether the number of trucks was arbitrary or whether the number of trucks was based upon the number of trucks available.
- MW: Was squadron a term that was used in the infantry or only in the trucks?
- Sennett: It was also used in the infantry. Actually, squads were smaller. It was called squad, not so much squadron. The squad in the infantry could be around fifteen men.
- MW: Did you then misspeak earlier when you were referring to these two squadrons in the regiment? Did you mean two squads?
- Sennett: No, they are squadrons. There is a difference between a squad and a squadron and there is a difference in the transportation corps as compared with the infantry, so this had no bearing upon how large an infantry squad was versus the transportation squadron. In Spain, our squadron of 110 men was more like a company, and there were two in the regiment. Our squadron was larger than what an infantry squad would be. We had sections and section leaders within the squadron; we didn't use the term squad.
- MW: You were given uniforms. Were these Spanish army uniforms?
- Sennett: Yes, they were.
- MW: Did you have any distinctive markings?
- Sennett: We had the markings of the international brigades, which would be a patch that looks something like the Mercedes Benz insignia.
- MW: That was on your uniform shoulder patch?

Sennett: No, it was not used as a shoulder patch. If you are trying to compare it to the American army in which it was standard [laughs], it was not the case. Not everybody had a patch to wear. It was not a standard issue.

MW: Why? They just didn't have enough?

Sennett: It wasn't mandatory. The uniforms obviously were quite--well, they didn't all look the same either. I got the impression that everytime a new batch of uniforms was made, it was tailored a little differently. Most of the time the men did not wear uniform uniforms.

MW: Were the uniforms you were issued all-purpose or did you have dress uniform, summer uniform, winter uniform, fatigues, combat clothes, or what?

Sennett: No, as I recall, it was just one all-purpose uniform.

MW: Was it a cold-weather or warm-weather uniform?

Sennett: It was a warmer uniform obviously for the cold weather. We had arrived in the cold weather, so we got a warm uniform and then we got a lighter uniform when it warmed up.

MW: Did any of you have rank at this stage?

MW: No, the ranks were just being organized. Rank had already been established with the French in charge of the Regiment de Tren. There was a man whose name was De Guey--I don't remember his first name--who was the commander in charge of the Regiment de Tren. De Guey was something like D-e-g-u-e-y or however the French spell it.

Then a Marcel Pin [spells name] was already established as the political commissar. Those were the two officers who were in charge of structuring the Regiment de Tren.

MW: Did they speak English?

Sennett: Very little.

MW: But the commander of your regiment was this Frenchman, De Guey?

Sennett: Yes. Now, when we got there, the first squadron of the regiment already was established. Our squadron consisted of Americans, some British, Australians, and Canadians.

- MW: Was this to be your permanent assignment for the war? This was to be your outfit? Did you know that you were going to end up in transportation or did you have options? Or did you just sort of fall into that because you drove the truck from the border?
- Sennett: That was it. It was accidental, as many things are in life. We just happened to be there when the trucks were in Figueras. We drove the trucks and, as a result, were assigned to transportation work. A few of the Figueras drivers were assigned to other outfits.
- MW: How did you feel about that?
- Sennett: Well, I felt a little disappointed, but I didn't question the assignment. I kind of liked the idea, on the other hand, that we would be able to drive around in trucks and see something of Spain and be a little freer than the infantry, so I didn't resist. There were a few men who asked to go into the infantry. I don't recall whether any of them got in.
- MW: Your assumption in going over there was that you were going to end up carrying a rifle and fighting on the front line and then you discovered that you were going to be driving in a truck and that was the only sense in which you felt disappointed, is that it?
- Sennett: Yes.
- MW: This is leaping way ahead, but do you think there is any relationship between your truck driving and transportation work in Spain and the career which you have subsequently had, which was very successful, in transportation in this country?
- Sennett: [laughs] I'm not sure that my work in transportation wasn't just as accidental as my driving a truck in Spain was. There was no relationship, although I must say that I learned something about trucking in Spain and it didn't hurt in my future experience.
- MW: What did you learn?
- Sennett: I learned how to drive a truck, let's start with that, and I learned what trucks can and can't do. I learned what it would be good to do if you had bigger trucks. In that respect, I also learned something about convoys and logistics and I was involved in certain aspects of logistical work.
- MM: You probably would be a good technical logistics consultant for military activities today.

Sennett: Conversely, I have often thought that if I knew then in Spain what I learned later in the United States, I would have been a much more valuable asset to the Spanish transportation system.

MW: Can you explain that a little bit? What was done there that was incorrect that could have been done better?

Sennett: Well, it's not just a matter of what was incorrect. In the first place, if we had the equipment that was available in the United States, even at that time, we would have been more productive. I would have been able to deal with the logistical problems in Spain more clearly and I probably could have served a much more useful purpose. I believe I could have then contributed much more than I did with my work as a driver or as political commissar.

MW: The problem in transportation during the war then was basically a problem of dispatching or what?

Sennett: It was a problem, first of all, of not having enough equipment to start with. Secondly, it was a problem of knowing how to handle the equipment that you had. Now, anybody could drive a truck you can say and anybody can pick up freight, and we did that. But we did many things. We had to pick up soldiers, we had to pick up dead bodies at times and act as hearses, we had to pick up wounded people, we had to bring artillery pieces to the front and ammunition to the front, and we served a variety of needs.

Many times our trucks were called out one at a time to pick up some food or to pick up some ammunition or to pick up something special for a particular military outfit, and our trucks might "disappear" for weeks at a time. It may or may not have been used by that outfit. It might be better used elsewhere. The reason for that is that some military outfits, seeing a truck, would commandeer it and say, "You stay with us. We've got a lot of things for you to do." They would keep the men and trucks around, shorting the Regiment de Tren when it needed the equipment for other, more important projects.

MW: Are you saying that the commander of your regiment didn't know where his vehicles were part of the time?

Sennett: That's right.

MW: They would just go out and wouldn't come back?

Sennett: That's right.

MW: Wouldn't these guys who decided to stay with some other unit for awhile, wouldn't they send some kind of a message back and say, "I'm hung up here?"

Sennett: Sometimes they would and sometimes our commander would have to go out there and get them released. But after all, the Spanish army was so desperate for transportation that various commands might commandeer anybody's vehicle to get a certain job done.

MW: They had the authority to do that?

Sennett: They may not have had the legal authority to do that, but under wartime conditions you adapt to the needs of the moment and do what you can. Sometimes officers of other units would pull out a gun to commandeer a truck with its driver. Now, we understood why that was done and they weren't going to kill our people, but they were going to make sure that they got the use of the truck. So we did lose control of our men and resources at times. I'm not saying that more skilled people would have made it possible not to lose control.

MW: Was the loss of control a great degradation of the efficiency of the whole transportation operation?

Sennett: No, it could well be that they were performing a more valuable service elsewhere at times, particularly if there were a lot of trucks sitting around. After all, there were slack times at our base between operations.

MW: How about the maintenance of the equipment? Did you have enough skilled mechanics and spare parts?

Sennett: No, we didn't have enough mechanics or spare parts. There were times when a number of vehicles were down because spare parts were not available. The Europeans were among the best mechanics. We had a good American mechanic. His name was Jack Koble [spells name]. He fitted in very well with the Europeans and performed a valuable service. We picked up spare parts from wrecked or damaged trucks whether ours or trucks belonging to other outfits. We would go out after trucks damaged in battle and strip it down for all possible usable parts.

MW: Did these trucks have markings that indicated the international brigades in any way?

Sennett: Yes, they did. In fact, they had our name--First Regiment de Tren, first squadron or second squadron--and a recognizable logo.

MW: How many trucks were in the regiment?

Sennett: In the regiment as a whole we had probably a hundred and thirty to a hundred and forty total vehicles.

MW: Of which how many were operable at any given time?



American Squadron, First Regiment de Tren. *First row standing, from left--third: Bill Sennett--
fifth: James W. Ford, Communist party candidate for vice president in 1938 (visiting)--sixth: Robert
Minor, cartoonist for St. Louis Post Dispatch, and founder of the Communist party, 1919--seventh:*
Ralph Bates, British author. Castillo Vinuelos (near Madrid). May 1937.



Sennett: That's hard to say. I would say that most of the time at least seventy-five percent were operable.

MW: And only one mechanic to maintain all of this?

Sennett: No, the one mechanic I mentioned who was an American had been our squadron mechanic. But there was also a base mechanic shop and there were probably ten to twelve mechanics all told.

MW: Where was the base located?

Sennett: It moved around. It started off in the auto park and it moved out from there.

MW: At Albacete?

Sennett: At Albacete.

MW: And it moved out.

Sennett: It moved out to whatever front we were involved with. We started off in Albacete and we moved to a place near Madrid known as Castillo Vinuelos which was, I learned, formerly owned by the Duke of Asuno, who was at that time an absentee landlord.

MW: How was your squadron staffed?

Sennett: The officer corps for our squadron was chosen by the French regimental offices. It probably had something to do with one's credentials and the Albacete base recommendations.

MW: Were they chosen by the Spanish?

Sennett: No, they were suggested by the leading nationals of the various international brigades. A man named Perry was appointed as the commanding officer. He had had some peacetime service in the American army.

MW: Commanding officer of the second squadron?

Sennett: That's right.

MW: We ought to nail down what "Tren" means too if we could. It couldn't be an acronym for something having to do with transportation, could it?

Sennett: When you talk about trucks, you talk about camiones in Spanish. Whatever the meaning of tren, Perry was chosen as the commanding officer. He came from Virginia and he had some limited military

Sennett: experience. He seemed to be a man in his late thirties. Sanford Land was chosen as the adjutant and he came from Ohio. His mother was, as I recall, a prominent left-wing attorney in Cleveland.

SERVING AS POLITICAL COMMISSAR

Sennett: I was chosen as the political commissar.

MW: How did that happen?

Sennett: I don't know. There was no election or vote. It wasn't by popular choice. Most of us had gotten to know each other from the boat trip or in Figueras. But the choice was made by the regiment commissar. It seems to me that it had something to do with information about me passed on to the international brigades from the states.

MW: Had you previously been familiar with what a political commissar was?

Sennett: No, I had only heard about political commissars in the Soviet Union. It was begun during the civil war in Russia. This was a political rank. However, it was to complement the work of military officers to help educate the men, to stimulate them, develop a high morale and make them more effective soldiers. Commissars were supposed to concern themselves with the needs of the men, given the circumstances under which the men were fighting.

MW: Did you know all this when they said, "Bill, you are going to be political commissar." Did you know what you were supposed to do?

Sennett: I was briefed on the role of a political commissar by the regimental commissar.

MW: How did you feel about this?

Sennett: I felt very good. I felt very proud. I figured that there weren't any experienced political commissars around and that I could fit into that responsibility. But I had occasion to think more about the commissar's role some time later.

MW: Think about what?

Sennett: Think about who should be in command, what kind of leaders were needed, what kind of experience does one need to have, and who those people should be.

MW: Did you feel that as you reflected on this, that good choices had been made generally?

Sennett: I didn't know Perry and I didn't know Sandy Land. I did not think in terms of whether the best choices were made. At the time I figured that the officers would be able to do the jobs required.

MW: How did the choices turn out?

Sennett: It didn't turn out too well because all three choices were replaced at a later date.

MW: Do you mean you, Land, and Perry were removed from the regiment?

Sennett: Yes. Land and Perry were transferred out of the regiment to improve the leadership and satisfy the feelings of the men in the ranks.

MW: Are we going to get into that later?

Sennett: Yes, we will.

MW: This is sort of a cliff-hanging. [laughs] It's a good place to pick up next week.

MY BROTHER MAURY JOINS THE REGIMENT

[Interview 4: August 25, 1981]##

MW: This fourth session, on August 25, 1981, will continue discussion of the organization of your regiment in the Spanish war. Bill, do you want to pick up where we left off?

Sennett: Yes, we moved out, I had mentioned, to an old castle near Madrid known as Castillo Vinuelos, formerly owned by the Duke of Asuno. [spells name]

MW: You moved there from where?

Sennett: We moved there from the auto park in Albacete. We had some small amount of work that was done by individual trucks. These trucks were sent out on missions to pick up rations and perform some special transportation services for local military outfits.

MW: But you were actually doing work?

- Sennett: We were doing some work and a lot of laying around and waiting; most people did. We had, of course, some discussions about the war and we had some additional volunteers join us at Castillo Vineuelos. Among them was my brother Maury. [spells name] He is a year and a half older than I and he was also a political person in the sense that he had become a member of the Young Communist League.
- MW: You mentioned him very early, his running away and everything. But I don't think you had mentioned earlier his political activation. Had he been active in politics as long as you?
- Sennett: Yes, except he had not become as deeply involved as I. He was a kind of a passive member.
- MW: Did he go into politics first or did you?
- Sennett: No, I think that we did it almost simultaneously. We both joined the youth section of the International Workers' Order.
- MW: Was this in consultation with each other?
- Sennett: We must have talked about it together, yes.
- MW: But this was not when you were living in the same domicile, or was it?
- Sennett: Yes, we were both living at home.
- MW: You were both living at home and you both got active?
- Sennett: That's right.
- MW: So there was a lot of camaraderie between you and Maury then?
- Sennett: More than with anyone else in the family.
- MW: Then he followed you to Spain?
- Sennett: He followed me, yes.
- MW: Following your example in effect?
- Sennett: I don't know whether it was my example, but he decided that he would go. He also was married at that time. He arrived with some

Sennett: others who joined the outfit to fill out the second squadron. The second squadron was the American squadron essentially, even though it included other English-speaking people who had come to Spain.

The second squadron was organized after the first squadron, which was part of the Regiment de Tren when there was only one squadron. This was essentially peopled by the French and, as a result, the French had been in the leadership of the whole regiment. As time went on, anti-Fascist Germans, Belgians, Dutch, and other Europeans were added to the first squadron as well.

The mechanical group was organized as a regimental, mechanical section; that is, it served both the first and second squadron even though each squadron had some individual mechanics. Later, all mechanics were integrated into the base section mechanical group.

MW: Were all of the organizational decisions about these matters made within the regiment or were there some Spanish army offices who were deciding about all of these matters?

Sennett: There was a liaison between the regimental officers and the Fifth Army. I'm not sure who that liaison was. It was as a part of the Spanish army because we were integrated with the Spanish army.

MW: Did you see a lot of Spanish officers around giving orders observing what was going on?

Sennett: Not essentially giving orders directly to us, but obviously the higher command was Spanish. Since we were part of the Fifth Army and were not part of the regular military structure of the international brigades. We, therefore, had a lot of contact with the Spanish officers. For example, the commanding officer in charge of the Fifth Army was Juan Modesto, a colonel who became one of the leading generals of the Spanish Republican Army. We met him from time to time as we carried out missions for the headquarters group.

MW: Did you ever meet him personally?

Sennett: Yes, I did. He never came to address our group. It was just that he was a very friendly guy and a number of people got to know him.

MW: Did he speak English?

Sennett: No, he didn't.

MW: Was your Spanish good enough then to be able to converse with him?

Sennett: No, it was not. My Spanish was poor, but my brother happened to be a linguist and actually became a translator of the First Regiment along with his truck driving duties. He spoke fluent Spanish, good French, and fair German, and as a result was performing a useful function in developing communication by and between all of us.

MW: Did he learn that before he went to Europe or had he learned it while he was here?

Sennett: All he had was high school French and Spanish. The German, I'm sure, he picked up as a result of the Yiddish and he was very adept at picking up languages. The French and Spanish was what I guess the ordinary youngster gets with two years of a language, but with him it stuck and he was able to pick up languages with greater facility than most of us.

The base actually, therefore, was being set up for us to participate in what would later become the first large scale offensive by the Loyalists since the Fascists had revolted. We made another move at that time. We moved to enlarge our operation outside of the castle and we went into an area around the Henares River [spells name] northeast of Madrid. This was kind of a regrouping action for the Spanish troops. We were, of course, being ordered to assist them to move up to the front and to bring in ammunition for the time when the Madrid sector offensive would begin. This base along the Henares River was right outside of a small town known as San Fernando northeast of the city.

LIFE ON THE BASE AT FUENCARREL

Sennett: We were moved to what would become our most permanent base and the place where we stayed the longest, a suburb of Madrid known as Fuencarrel. [spells name] This was a place where we were told to dig in on a semipermanent basis; that is, to pitch tents and make shelters. We had the luxury, being a transportation group, of even setting up a little library and rest area for recreation purposes.

At this base we set up a wall newspaper and we had even a camp newspaper that was printed, which was called The Voice of the Regiment. It was supposed to serve both squadrons and as a result it was published in Spanish, French, and English. Every once in a while there was an article printed in German. This was not a publication that came out very often. I think there were only three issues all told.

MW: Was it news of the war or international news or just a little of everything?

Sennett: It was a little bit of everything.

MW: Back home sports, that kind of thing?

Sennett: No, basically it didn't do that because it had to serve the interests of the various national groups. It was mainly about the war. It dealt with the progress of the war, developments in Spain, Fascist propaganda, international events bearing on Spain, some humorous incidents, and so forth.

MW: Were you involved in the publication of this at all?

Sennett: Yes, I was. As the political commissar, I was one of the editors along with other national group representatives.

MW: Whose idea was it to have this? Was it yours?

Sennett: No, the regimental commissar, Marcel Pin, proposed it.

MW: Was this designed primarily as an ideological device to keep people correctly oriented politically about the war or was there some kind of demand for this?

Sennett: No, there wasn't really a demand. Actually, volunteers were asked to write if they wished and some stories were suggested to certain people. Also, people were encouraged to write poems, some humor, draw a cartoon, or make a statement on the wall newspaper.

MW: It didn't have a layout? It was prepared and put up in one piece?

Sennett: Everybody could tack up whatever they wished on the board.

MW: It didn't have to be approved first or anything of that nature?

Sennett: No.

MW: Were there any controversies that were argued out on this wall newspaper or gripes and that sort of thing?

Sennett: No, but I would say that, from time to time, there probably were some humorous or subtle pieces which were written in criticism of one officer or another without identifying the person--but not too much of that.

Sennett: When we got to Fuencarrel, more of our trucks were called upon to help move the Fifth Army's military supplies into a new forward position. In the meantime, we improved camp facilities. We had the luxury of having with us a group of Spanish civilians who worked with our cook. Four women who lived in a nearby village came to work for us at our base. The oldest, a woman in her forties, was the aunt of two of the younger girls who were still in their teens.

MW: Now, these were people who were just residents of Fuencarrel?

Sennett: Residents from around Madrid. I don't know whether they lived in Fuencarrel.

MW: How were they recruited? Did they just happen to drop in?

Sennett: No, apparently one of the Spaniards knew some of the women around the area. They wanted to help and they participated in cooking and cleaning up.

MW: You mentioned that she was the aunt of two young girls, implying that the two young girls had had some kind of relationship with the regiment prior to her becoming the cook.

Sennett: I really don't recall the circumstances of their recruitment. The aunt was also there to keep a watchful eye on the young girls who were surrounded by all those lonesome men in camp.

MW: Right, but what I was getting at was how did the young girls happen to be there in the first place?

Sennett: They came as a group. They were not recruited individually. It was the aunt who brought her two nieces plus another young woman.

GETTING NEWS OF THE WAR AND THE OUTSIDE WORLD

MW: Let me ask you, during this waiting around and relative to your wall newspaper and your printed newspaper, did you have the sense that you knew what was going on in the war or was information about the status of the war difficult to come by?

Sennett: We were getting some publications from the states. We used to get the Daily Worker from time to time, the English Communist paper, the Spanish newspapers. Additionally, a variety of newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals would come in for the men in both

Sennett: squadrons. We did get information from the outside world. There were bulletins issued by the war commissariat that would give us information about military, foreign, and domestic development.

MW: Right, but military communiques tend to put the most optimistic slant on information about their own side. They never say, "We are suffering serious defeats and we are beaten badly." They say, "We are making heroic stands and counterattacks," and all that sort of thing. Did you ever have any impression that the information that was coming from the press and from these foreign sources was at variance with the facts as you knew them out there?

Sennett: That's a valid point. As a result of contact with Americans and others at the front, for example, we learned that the Lincolns had been almost decimated at the Jarama front.

MW: Now, when you say the Lincolns, do you mean--

Sennett: The Lincoln Battalion. This was the military formation of the Fifteenth Brigade. There were five international brigades. Obviously, as a result of that military operation we knew it was a disastrous battle for our side. But on the other hand, it did slow down the Fascists' drive to take Madrid. We knew, of course, that a whole number of other military fronts had caved in in the south and north of Spain and that the Fascists were continuing to gain additional land victories all around the country. Offensively, by mid-year 1937, there wasn't much to point to except for a counter offensive by Italian anti-Fascists north of Madrid around Guadalajara against Italian regular troops, who were sent to Spain by Mussolini to assist Franco. This was a symbolic as well as an important military victory. The anti-Fascist Italian volunteers were pitted against the regular army forces of the Fascist Italian government. The Fascist offensive was beaten back, the enemy sustained large losses in men and material, and the drive to take Madrid in 1937 was decisively ended. This was the most encouraging news we heard about military operations as we were preparing to go into action in 1937.

We were inexperienced and somewhat naive with respect to the real state of affairs in Spain. At least that applied to me. When the first large-scale offensive action was undertaken by the Spanish Republic (known as the Brunete [spells name] offensive), the Fascist lines west of Madrid were broken open and the Republicans captured a number of towns in the first days of the offensive. The Fascists moved in vast numbers of troops and material and counterattacked successfully, rolling back the Republican offensive. In an article that I wrote for The Voice of the Regiment, which dealt with the launching of the offensive, the headline was, "The Beginning of the End," which would give you an idea of the prevailing optimism expressed or, at least, my own.

Sennett: [reading] "The Republic has launched its first great offensive. It has achieved signal victories, and this is an example of what is going to happen in all of Spain. The Republic is now on the way to winning the war."

MW: You really believed that?

Sennett: I did, yes; only for a short time.

MW: Do any copies of that paper still survive?

Sennett: That paper does exist in the archives of the information that we have about the Abraham Lincoln Brigade at The Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley.

WAITING FOR THE OFFENSIVE

Sennett: In any case, we obviously believed that Republican Spain was beginning to gain the upper hand and that the inevitable final result was victory.

MW: Let me ask you about going into town. Did you have to get passes to go into town?

Sennett: Yes, we did. There were passes given, but we had the advantage of being able to keep people on duty to man the trucks because we had extra drivers. There were at least three drivers for every two trucks.

MW: Were there MPs who would pick people up who were on leave without passes, that sort of thing?

Sennett: There were MPs, yes.

MW: Your own MPs or were these the Spanish MPs?

Sennett: There were Spanish MPs. We did not have any MPs patrolling Madrid when the men were on leave or on pass.

MW: When you went into Madrid, did you go in civilian clothes or in uniform?

Sennett: No, we went in uniform, but I must say that the uniform and civilian clothes were interchangeable. We wore pieces of civilian clothes. We may have bought them. It was not required to be in

Sennett: regular uniform, and most of the time you just wore whatever happened to be clean. It might have been part of your civilian clothes and part of your uniform.

MW: Would you say that discipline in these matters was fairly loose, that people could more or less go and wear what they wanted to?

Sennett: Oh, absolutely. There was none of this spit and polish that I encountered when I was in the American army.

ROLE OF THE POLITICAL COMMISSAR

MW: As a political commissar, did you have any authority in issuing passes and all that sort of thing?

Sennett: Yes.

MW: Were you the person who issued them?

Sennett: No, the military commander had to agree that the men could be spared. After all, the military commander had to have access to the men for whatever assignment came up. So the military commander generally made the decision. But once in a while people would ask the commissar to intervene for a pass in their behalf.

MW: Did you play the kind of role that the chaplain played in the American army in that sense, sort of an appeal against military authority?

Sennett: To some extent, but I would not compare the role of the political commissar to the chaplain at all. I'm not talking about the spiritual role. The political commissar was actually consulted by the military on certain workloads. The military commander could make the decision. On the other hand, if there was a good working relationship with the political commissar, there might be some consultation or discussion before a military order was issued.

MW: Did you ever have any conflicts with the military commander?

Sennett: No, I don't think so, because at the very beginning, when I was the political commissar and we were in the process of getting organized, my attitude was that this is wartime and whatever the higher command decides must be done without question. I guess I relayed that attitude to the men in that fashion. If I had some question about certain orders with the officer in my squadron, I would discuss it with him after the order was issued unless my opinion was sought first.

MW: Was that kind of attitude toward authority fairly common among the Americans there? Were they all quite willing to submit to discipline or was there a lot of recalcitrance?

Sennett: No, it depended upon who happened to be the commander and what the circumstances were. As time went on, there was more griping and more second-guessing. But at least the men had the opportunity to air their grievances openly. The men had their own ideas about what was necessary and what was not necessary. And it did not always conform to what the military or political decisions were.

MW: Would you describe this in present terms as kind of a laid-back operation, informal, essentially unmilitary?

Sennett: I think while we were in camp and at the base, it was essentially that. But I must say that when it came to responding to duty, there was no one that I know who really shirked and who wasn't ready to pop out whenever it was necessary to do a job, no matter how unpleasant that job might be. There might have been some griping before a man went on a certain duty or a guy said, "Hey, I was just called out and I was on for forty-eight hours and I haven't had much chance to get sleep." Well, if there was no one else available, there might be some bitching about it, but the guys went out to do the job. Most of the bitching took place when there was a lull in military activity.

MW: I interrupted you earlier when you were beginning to say something about the general conditions of the camp.

##

THE RANKS REMOVE THEIR OFFICERS

Sennett: I recounted last week some of the information about these three officers in the group who were removed and I mentioned that these were the people who were appointed by the regimental command when the second squadron was being organized.

MW: Who were they?

Sennett: Two of the officers were removed by the regimental command directly. One was the commanding officer, Perry, who apparently had a very bad temper and got into a fight with one of the men while drunk and was removed from command. The second was Sanford Land, who would have been his replacement. He was not very

Sennett: popular with the men, and he was transferred out of the outfit to make room for a new team. While the men didn't have a direct say in the new appointments, their sentiments were taken into account.

Then I was removed as a result of a squadron discussion about leadership and my role. The majority voted against my remaining as commissar. Looking back at that, I can see that while I tried to blame objective conditions--the griping of the men while they were sitting around not having very much to do and their lack of understanding the need for discipline during the war--my own limitations stood in the way of my handling that job.

My own role was one I came to understand in retrospect. I took things too literally and carried out commands without question. I obviously had picked up the kind of bureaucratic approach that was a negative side of Communist leadership. I brought it to Spain and conducted myself as a political leader in a very bureaucratic, dogmatic, and pompous fashion. Obviously, I didn't endear myself to most of the men who were in the second squadron and, as a result, I was forced to resign my position.

It was a very good thing for me. That doesn't mean that I did not once again become a bureaucratic leader of the Communist party [laughs], but nevertheless, it at least made me stop, look, and begin to listen a little bit more, perhaps a lot more, than I ever had done in the past.

MW: You lost your position as political commissar?

Sennett: That's right.

MW: Do you remember the date?

Sennett: No, I don't remember the date. I'm not sure. I think it was in June of 1937.

MW: You had been political commissar--

Sennett: From the time when the regiment was organized, which was about March 1, and as a result I decided it would probably be best if I left the outfit. I thought that I should go in as a rank-and-filer, as a soldier, and that the best thing to do would be for me to go into the infantry. I requested a transfer to the Lincoln Battalion.

MW: This wasn't in a fit of pique, was it? You weren't angry and decided that you just wanted to get out of this outfit?

Sennett: I obviously was angry initially, but in reflecting, I thought that the best thing to do would be to get in on the ground floor with other men instead of those who had made certain judgments about me and that it would probably be a little easier for me to make my way in another outfit.

MW: Was there an age factor involved in any of this, your being a political commissar and being young? Were most of the people older or were they roughly your age?

Sennett: They were roughly my age. There was a new political commissar elected. His name was Bob Steck.

MW: After you?

Sennett: After me, to replace me. Bob Steck was probably--I was twenty-two--Bob Steck may have been twenty-four or twenty-five. [spells name]

MW: How did you feel about him? Did you get on with him?

Sennett: Yes, I had no personal arguments and there was no recrimination either by me or the other men as a result of what happened. But Bob Steck was a more personable guy at that time. He fitted in with the mood of the men. He was a very conscientious anti-Fascist and, I believe, a member of the Young Communist League. We didn't ask people who were and who were not members, but I am pretty certain that he was at that time. He was very good at organizing social activities and there was a lot of social activity going on in the camp. He, I would say, knew how to handle people a lot better than I did under the circumstances of that time.

SERVING WITH THE LINCOLN BATTALION

Sennett: I did not get a formal transfer to the Lincolns. On the other hand, I decided to go down to the Lincolns at their base and meet with Steve Nelson, the political commissar, to ask him to formally request the transfer.

MW: This is the Steve Nelson who was later a top official in the American Communist party?

Sennett: Yes, Steve Nelson, who had been imprisoned under the Pennsylvania sedition law and served in prison for two years before he was released and before it was declared unconstitutional. He was also indicted under the Smith Act, the federal law directed at the Communist party.

MW: Are you talking about before the Spanish war or afterwards?

Sennett: This was after the Spanish war.

MW: All of these things that you mentioned were afterwards?

Sennett: That is correct.

MW: But what had been his role prior to the Spanish war?

Sennett: He had been in Pittsburg, Detroit, and Chicago. He worked in the steel and auto industries. He was a rough hewn, compassionate, and talented organizer.

MW: Was he a top Communist leader before the Spanish war?

Sennett: No, I only heard of him in Spain.

MW: Were you aware in Spain when you heard his name that he was something of a celebrity in the movement?

Sennett: I don't know whether celebrity is the word to use. Let's say he was a known leader. At that time, I am not sure that he was a national leader, but he later became a national leader of the Communist party. At this time, he was a political commissar of the Lincoln Battalion. He later became the political commissar of the Fifteenth Brigade. The brigade was composed of a whole number of battalions including, of course, French and Spanish and other national groups. Primarily it was English and American but other battalions were added.

MW: You started to mention that you were going to see him.

Sennett: I asked Durward Clark, who had become our military commander, for permission to go up to the battalion and find out what the circumstances were with respect to my transfer and he agreed. When I got up to the battalion, I found that the battalion was getting ready to go into action.

MW: Where was this, by the way?

Sennett: This was around the Madrid front.

MW: About how far from Fuencarrel?

Sennett: It was probably no more than thirty miles away. I was, therefore, immediately faced with a situation in which the battalion was going into action. I thought, "Gee, that's great." Steve Nelson said, "Worry about your transfer later." Meanwhile, I met a friend of mine, a Chicago west-side YCLer, whom I had recruited to go to Spain. His name was Morrie Granat. [spells name] Morrie was a section leader, a sergeant, and he had a squad under him. He suggested that I could get into his squad and he would give me as much fundamentals as possible just before going into action.

MW: When you went up there, were you on a pass or did you just go?

Sennett: No, I was on a pass. The commanding officer had said I could go to visit the Lincolns to see about the transfer.

MW: Then you got up there and they said, "Just stay here." So in effect you would be AWOL from your own outfit.

Sennett: [chuckles] For a time, in practice, I was. But nevertheless, the circumstances there were that Steve Nelson said, "You know Morrie. Why don't you just get into this outfit for the time being and we will worry about everything else after the action is over." And that was it. We were around for several days more before the action went on and Morrie taught me how to take the rifle apart. I really had tried to do it at camp and wasn't very adept at it, and I got some more instructions along that line.

MW: Do you remember what kind of a rifle it was?

Sennett: No, I don't. I'm not sure whether it was a Czech rifle. There were a lot of Czech rifles. A lot of the rifles and stuff were of World War I vintage.

MW: Were they all standard? Did everybody have the same weapon or was there a mix of weapons?

Sennett: At the beginning, it seemed to me that there were probably two different types of rifles. One was a Czech and I am not sure whether the other was a Russian.

MW: So on a one-to-one basis this friend of yours was sort of giving you basic training, right?

Sennett: He was giving me a crash course. We weren't doing any firing over there. After all, we were getting ready to go up to the front. So we started to march into position.

MARCHING TO THE FRONT

Sennett: There were phases of marching into position; you didn't just march up to the front. As I recall, we marched into position in stages for about a week to ten days.

MW: You didn't actually get a chance to fire the weapon before you went up to the front?

Sennett: No, but I had fired the weapon before. I had fired the weapon and taken some practice in the transportation camp at Fuencarrel. When I decided to go up, I began to do some firing and so I did get some practice.

MW: Had you any instructions about signals on the battlefield and not to bunch up and make yourselves easy targets for the enemy and how to creep and crawl--the kind of squad tactics that are taught in basic training?

Sennett: We had a little of that, starting with Figueras when we first got across the mountains and came to the old fort in Spain. There was just a little bit of that. Obviously, as part of a transportation group we didn't do too much of that. What we did was practice camouflaging our trucks and learning how to find cover for ourselves when we got up to the front. But Morrie gave me some instruction along that line in terms of what you do when you are walking next to tanks, how you crawl up and cradle the gun in your arm and all of that type of stuff. So I did get that as we stopped daily in our march up to the front.

MW: How about other weapons. Did you learn any other weapons or hand grenades or explosives?

Sennett: Just how to pull the pin on hand grenades and when to lob them if needed.

MW: How to pull the pin and how to throw it?

Sennett: Yes.

MW: Were these imported? Do you know where the hand grenades were made?

Sennett: I think they were Russian. I say that because I recall later on driving a load of hand grenades up to the front and they were Russian. At that time, I was even driving a Russian truck to bring them up to the front.

- MW: Were there any markings on the grenades themselves in the Russian language or anything like that?
- Sennett: I don't recall. As we began to get closer to the front lines, marching up, we were strafed by enemy planes. We began, then, to move into position where there was enemy artillery within reach.
- MW: As you went to the front, was this a march or in vehicles?
- Sennett: No, it was a march. Once we were marching close to the front, it was all by foot and, as I recall, we had marched for over a week straight with no vehicles. We were just marching into the front lines.
- MW: What kinds of marching formations did you have? Were these long columns on both sides of the road and did you have instructions on what to do in case of strafing and bombing?
- Sennett: Yes, we got that kind of information and it was based upon the squad. The squad was a group, I believe, of about twelve to fourteen men. Mine was led by Morrie Granat. This particular squad was always in touch with the rest of the company and the company, of course, was part of the battalion and, as a result, orders came back as to which squad was to go into which position.
- MW: How was their communication? You didn't have walkie-talkie radios.
- Sennett: No, there were runners and wire would be laid for telephone contact.
- MW: Did I describe it correctly? You were marching in columns along both sides of the road?
- Sennett: Yes, and there were, of course, times when we were marching in the fields and there was no road.
- MW: Did you carry your own rations?
- Sennett: We carried our own rations.
- MW: On your back?
- Sennett: No. At that particular time, we were able to stop and get a hot meal before we actually got into--
- MW: From a mess?
- Sennett: There were certain points at which the food was able to be prepared and handed out.

MW: In this march, how many troops were there altogether, do you know? Just the Lincoln?

Sennett: It was the whole Lincoln Battalion. The Lincoln Battalion was deployed and was moving up by the squad to the front.

MW: But there were no other units going along, too?

Sennett: They were not starting from the same place. They were at other parts of the staging area moving up to go to the front but to different parts of that front.

The Brunete offensive began on July 6, 1937. At this particular time, we had more planes than I had ever seen go into action. It was the largest and, as people say, the most beautiful sight to see, at least with so many of our planes. The planes were coming in waves. Each wave consisted of five to ten planes. But I learned later that all told there were fewer than one hundred Loyalist planes used in the offensive.

MW: Was there any danger of being bombed by your own planes? Were the lines fairly well delineated at this point and could people in the air see where to drop their bombs?

Sennett: This front was. After all, the enemy had been dug in at those lines for months. So the front was pretty well marked and mapped as a result.

MW: Were you being bombed and strafed, too?

Sennett: Yes, after our planes, then of course there were enemy planes and there were also dogfights.

THE BRUNETE OFFENSIVE

Sennett: On different days--I don't know which days were which--when the offensive started, we were doing the bombing. Then, of course, as days wore on we were being bombed and strafed.

MW: Now, in this offensive, did you sort of walk into it when it was underway and take up positions when the offensive was already in progress or did you all assemble and wait for a signal to start off? It wasn't only the Lincolns involved in the offensive?

Sennett: Oh, no. Some fifty thousand troops had been committed.

MW: Okay, it was a big offensive.

Sennett: Yes.

MW: Was it underway when you arrived?

Sennett: No, we were there for the start of the offensive from the first day.

MW: Did you know in advance what day the offensive was going to take place?

Sennett: No.

MW: Probably the enemy would have had pretty good intelligence to the effect that an offensive was going to take place because of the massing of troops in that area.

Sennett: Yes, I would say so and I don't believe that it was the kind of secret that could be completely hidden. They had to speculate obviously on what was going to happen; they weren't exactly sure. A lot of our movements in approaching the front were at nighttime. Positioning at night obviously is of some assistance.

MW: Sure, you are less likely to get strafed.

Sennett: Yes. After several days of the offensive, I recall that we moved into a town, which we captured. It was called Villaneuva de la Canada.

MW: Let me ask you before you talk about that town, what was your first military action personally? When did you start shooting at people or get shot at?

Sennett: I would say on the third day.

MW: What did that involve?

Sennett: It just involves opening fire in a certain direction. You don't see--at last, we didn't at that point--see a particular target. You don't select somebody and say, "I'm going to shoot that person." You simply fire your bullets in the general direction of the enemy fire.

MW: Were you in a trench?

Sennett: No, we were not in trenches. We dropped down to get some shelter in a ditch, but we were not digging in. After all, we were on the offensive and we didn't move out of trenches.

MW: Were you assigned something to take or something to attack?

Sennett: Yes.

MW: You arrived there and somebody said, "There is a firehouse, go after that"? How did that work?

Sennett: You just moved up with the group, as I moved up with my squad, and the whole squad moved together.

MW: Did you have an objective?

Sennett: The objective we were focusing on, I learned, was Villaneuva de la Canada. Now, there were other towns to the west and south, but other forces were involved in taking those towns or at least engaging the enemy so that the main attack could be carried out successfully. Of course, when you are in action, it is so chaotic. The infantryman does not really know what is going on until he is clued into specific targets. We saw civilians coming out of the town with their hands up. We then moved into the town after the town was battered by tanks and artillery. We were coming in, by the way, walking next to tanks.

MW: What kind of fire were you receiving from this first day of your military action?

Sennett: It was a mixture of everything. We received artillery shells, and bullets were flying. We were bombed and we were being strafed.

MW: What was the most frightening?

Sennett: The most frightening sound is the whining sound of bombs from airplanes and then the burst, explosions, and pitch of flying shrapnel. They don't cause as many casualties on the battlefield but the sounds are more frightening.

MW: Did these fall fairly close to where you were?

Sennett: Of course. But airplane bombing cannot be used in closer contact with the enemy--strafing, yes, but not the dropping of bombs. This is done only in preparation, the "softening up," before the movement of the troops.

MW: I am trying to get a picture of the moment when you first went into action of what you felt like, what was happening, did you feel bullets whizzing around you? When you started to shoot, did you know what you were shooting at?

Sennett: No, I did not know what I was shooting at. I was just shooting at a general direction.

MW: Somebody said, "Shoot that way," so you shot that way--no target or anything?

Sennett: That's it. It's the same both ways in the main, unless people are sharpshooters and they are selected to pick out certain individual targets. It's only when you get closer to enemy soldiers or as you close in on a town that you can zero in on selected targets.

Villaneuve de Canada was pretty much shattered and all that was left in the town when we entered were civilians. There were dead soldiers draped over artillery pieces and lying all around the battlefield.

MW: Were you taking casualties during this period?

Sennett: We had casualties.

MW: A lot?

Sennett: Well, it didn't seem that way.

MW: Did anybody near you get hit?

Sennett: Yes, yes, there were a few people that were hit and I was nicked. I just got a superficial bullet wound, but it was nothing that just couldn't be bandaged up on the spot, and it was.

MW: Where were you hit?

Sennett: I was hit on the calf of my right leg. It was nothing that required even first aid treatment. I had the bandage dressed a couple of times after that, but that's all there was to it. But there were others more seriously hurt and there were some fatalities.

MW: So being hit in the leg implies that you were standing up all the time.

Sennett: That was so in my case but one could get hit in the back of the calf in a prone position as well.

MW: Most of this advancing was running and falling down, and getting up and running again, and creeping and crawling and that sort of thing?

Sennett: And walking with or trailing the tanks as they advanced on the town.

MW: Were any tanks destroyed during this operation?

Sennett: I didn't see a tank destroyed. I saw a tank disabled; not that it was blown up, it was just not in good mechanical order! [laughter]

MW: So you came to the towns, you saw civilians and a few--

Sennett: Yes, and the soldiers were all gone by the time we entered the town. They had retreated. We had captured the town.

MW: This was Villaneuva de Canada?

Sennett: Yes, that's where I saw some dead Italian soldiers who had been manning the artillery pieces. Some had sausages around their necks and we took them for eating.

MW: How did you know they were Italians?

Sennett: They had Italian markings.

MW: They didn't have separate uniforms from the other Fascists.

Sennett: No, I don't think they wore separate uniforms, but there was a symbol or insignia indicating that. The offensive was blunted in about ten days and the Fascist counterattack rolled back the Republic lines. By this time, Durward Clark, our transport commander, had come up to the front looking for me. He asked me to come back to the Regiment de Tren. He indicated that there were some problems in the outfit and he felt that I could be of some help to him. He believed I could benefit more by working out my problems with my comrades in transport and that it would be better for all of us. In any case, Clark said that he was not going to agree to my transfer and he wanted me to come back to our base. After my brief infantry experience, I was relieved to accept Clark's offer.

##

RECOLLECTIONS OF DURWARD CLARK

Sennett: I wanted to talk a little about Durward Clark. [spells name] We called him Clarkie. He was an unusual volunteer in the sense that he was recruited to go to Spain by what was called the Debs Brigade. It was named after Eugene Victor Debs, an old-time Socialist who had once run for the Socialist party candidacy for the presidency of the United States. Clark was not a political person. He didn't volunteer because he was a staunch anti-Fascist. He came more for a sense of adventure. He was a truck driver in the states; in fact, the only professional truck driver among all

Sennett: of the Americans. He knew something about trucks and trailers and logistics and freight, and it was a combination that came in quite handy for our outfit. He knew how to turn trucks around, he knew how to organize convoys, he knew how to arrange the pickup and delivery of freight so that you could save a lot of wasted motion--

MW: Are you talking about big semitrailers now with tractors--

Sennett: He worked with semis, tractors, and trucks. Don't forget that in the thirties, while there were semitrailers, they were relatively small compared to the semitrailers that we have on the road today. The semitrailers in the thirties probably were no longer than thirty-two or thirty-five feet. Today the standard semitrailer is a forty-five footer.

MW: But you were saying he knew how to turn trucks around and that's why I asked the question because if it isn't an articulated truck, a semi, it isn't too hard to turn around, is it?

Sennett: I didn't mean that literally. I meant logistically. He knew how to get the greatest amount of utilization from a truck and that is something the trucking industry itself is always conscious of as it is the question of profit or loss in the United States. In Spain it was a matter of getting better use out of a limited number of trucks.

MW: In other words, you don't send a truck out with a load and then have it come back empty. You try to arrange a trip for the truck so that it is carrying freight back.

Sennett: But not only freight back. If you don't have a full load, you try to figure out how you can fill up a load and make it a more worthwhile trip than it might have been. Those are all things that people in the business understand, and people who don't understand it waste a lot of time, precious fuel, tires, and wear.

He was an excellent military leader for that kind of operation and yet he was not, as I said, a conscious political person. While he would sit in and listen to political discussions, it was very infrequent that Clark ever spoke up on political matters. Don Macleod, a member of our squadron, in recalling Clark's role to me, said his knowledge of trucking and his skill in getting the job done was outstanding. Clark worked very conscientiously and was excellent in working with people. This is something that probably was a natural talent of his. I don't recall him ever telling me that he had been a manager or a boss or a supervisor; he was a truck driver and he knew something about dispatching. You put the two together and take a man with that kind of talent, and he was able to direct men and handle men skillfully. We were all very impressed with Durward Clark.

MW: He was a Socialist?

Sennett: No, he was not a Socialist.

MW: He was totally nonideological?

Sennett: He was nonideological. He volunteered because the Debs Brigade, which was organized by the Socialist party, made it public that volunteers were being recruited. They advertised for volunteers. I think Clark told me that he saw or was referred to an ad in the New Republic. Somebody had called it to his attention. The whole Debs Brigade, if I remember, consisted of nine or ten people who went to Spain from the United States. On the other hand, the Communist party, which was primarily responsible for doing the big recruiting job in the United States, recruited about 2,600 volunteers. That doesn't mean that all of those volunteers were Communists--far from that--but it does indicate the extent of the party's effectiveness and organizing ability. While the Debs Brigade volunteers were small in number, they contributed several outstanding people. And Durward Clark stands high among them.

MW: Did the experience politicize him or did he go away as he came, without much of a political--

Sennett: I think that he was politicized to some extent. I don't know whether you could say he was converted to become a left-winger, but he certainly was an anti-Fascist and that was pretty clear. He may not have understood very much about fascism when he came, but he certainly knew a lot more as a result of his experience.

MW: Did you stay in touch with him after the war?

Sennett: No, and that's a very strange thing. In fact, there isn't anybody among those oldtimers who were part of the First Regiment de Tren that we know of who have ever seen or heard of Clark again. So apparently, as far as we know, he did not get into the progressive movement or the radical movement and did not become an activist anywhere.

MW: Did anybody check out his background prior to coming out there?

Sennett: Since he came with the Debs Brigade, the only ones who would have checked him out would have been the Debs Brigade, and we had no contact with them.

MW: There was never any suspicions that he might have been an intelligence agent on behalf of anyone.

Sennett: If he had been, it would have been very helpful for us as if the intelligence agency had sent more people like Clark.

MW: That's why I raised the question. It sounds to me like he was an ideal person to have been well placed to observe what was happening for any government that wanted to know what was going on in Spain.

Sennett: I don't think anybody ever was suspicious along that line. He didn't take any notes and he wasn't able to get any military secrets that would have been of any value to the intelligence agencies in the United States. It was impossible to conceive of Clark as being a part of the enemy and reporting for them.

MW: I raise the question only because I know you are familiar with a lot of efforts of government agencies to observe the Communist movement by putting people there and obviously governments, not only American governments but other governments, would be interested in having a transportation corps observer who would get around and see a lot of different things. You mentioned that he was a truck driver again. Is that really the kind of adventure that a truck driver seeks? I simply raise the question from that point of view.

Sennett: Well, it was an adventure for a truck driver to go to Spain and to be part of an army, obviously, and to be involved in that kind of action. It could have been pretty exciting and it obviously was a high point in his life. There were people who were discovered to have been sent by the intelligence agencies to Spain who were part of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. I don't know of any specific names, but it turned out that a few of them did testify for the government against the veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in proceedings to try to label the Abraham Lincoln Brigade as a subversive organization.

MW: This was much later, of course.

Sennett: This was much later in the United States, but some of those people who turned out to be informers were actually people who were planted.

MW: I get the impression from things you said earlier that security wasn't really very tight and that it would have been fairly easy to infiltrate this whole operation.

Sennett: Yes, anybody who wanted to volunteer could have easily infiltrated. There would be some probing into the background of those who came through the channels of Communist party recruitment but some intelligence agents did penetrate the network.

After the battles at Brunete, the Regiment de Tren was engaged in a number of other supporting actions on the Aragon front and around Teruel. The Aragon front offensive was

Sennett: concentrated around Belchite with American troops in the thick of battles there. We had a lot more to do in providing truck transportation services. Our trucks were used to bring ammunition and troops into Belchite and Teruel. We brought Fascist prisoners out. Several of our trucks were destroyed by artillery. Again, however, the enemy's superiority in weapons, planes, and transportation and supplies led to their recapture of all the territory they had lost earlier.

MW: What kind of losses did the Regiment de Tren suffer?

Sennett: As far as casualties were concerned, Don MacLeod, who had the best memory among the remaining veterans of the second squadron, recalls that we lost about twelve trucks; that is, to enemy action, by either bombing, artillery shelling, or capture. Along with that, we lost eleven men by bombing, artillery shell, or by simply being missing in action and never being accounted for.

MW: This is the whole regiment, not just your squadron?

Sennett: This would be in our squadron of the Regiment de Tren alone. The Germans and Italians were building up their forces in Spain, despite the protestations of the Soviet government and millions of people around the world. Nonintervention proved to be a farce, as German and Italian aid tipped the balance of the scales in favor of Franco's regime. The international brigades, of which we were a part, were being clobbered, and the replacements never quite made up for the losses.

WITHDRAWAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL BRIGADES

Sennett: The Spanish Republic decided to dramatize the issue of foreign involvement in the war in Spain. The Republic had continuously called for the withdrawal of all foreigners on both sides--the Italians and Germans who fought for the Fascist Franco and the international brigade soldiers on their side who were truly volunteers.

The Germans and the Italians were having none of this, and the nonintervention committee was expressing the timidity of the democracies that eventually led to Munich and World War II. The Loyalist government had said that it was going to withdraw all of its volunteers--this was a unilateral action. That meant that the international brigades would be withdrawn, dismantled, and the volunteers would be sent home. This happened in September of 1938 when that announcement was made. As a result, we were all being prepared to leave. Our outfit was to be taken over completely by

Sennett: Spaniards who were assigned to move in to our base and take our places. This process took about a month to complete.

In the meantime, the men in our regiment were getting their papers in order so that they could be discharged and leave for home. Our outfit was being discharged as the Spaniards took over the trucks and the men were able to leave singly as soon as their replacements were available. The men were asked to go to a government agency in the nearest city or town and they would be directed to the foreign department that would prepare the necessary paperwork for them to leave.

MW: So your group phased out on an individual basis. As you were individually replaced by Spaniards, you left?

Sennett: That's right.

MW: Whereas the Lincolns, they left en masse.

Sennett: The Lincolns left as a group and were phased out at a later date. I stayed with my outfit a little longer because I was a political delegate and had to see to it that all the other men were cleared for departure. I was one of the last people to leave my outfit when the Americans were being sent home.

MW: You say you were a political delegate; a delegate to what?

Sennett: After a time, we had elected political delegates for two sections of our squadron, so that in addition to the political commissar for the squadron, there were two political delegates who worked with him.

MW: These were small unit liaisons with the political commissar?

Sennett: That is correct.

MW: What was your reaction to the announcement that the brigades would be sent home?

Sennett: I was happy and downcast. I was happy because we were going to be able to go home. I was downcast because by that time we were convinced the war was being lost. There wasn't anything more that we in Spain could do about it. If there was going to be any change, then there would have to be direct intervention by the democracies in aiding the Spanish Republic. But we had also learned enough to know that it didn't seem likely that that was going to happen. We had lost faith in the League of Nations and we knew that for all practical purposes, their role in the Spanish Civil War was dooming that organization as a group, as a body.

DEALING WITH DESERTION

MW: Were there any desertions among the volunteers?

Sennett: Yes, there were some desertions and there were some people at a certain stage, particularly just before the Brunete offensive in our outfit--

MW: Now, when you say "our outfit"--

Sennett: --In the Regiment de Tren and, particularly, in our squadron among the Americans and the English, there were some people who wanted to go home and they talked about it to the political commissar who referred them to their military commander.

MW: That was Steck then?

Sennett: Yes. He was there at that time. The Spanish military commander of the regiment said that he would inquire in their behalf at a higher level of organization, and he did make some inquiries. This led some people to believe that all you had to do was say you wanted to go home and it was entirely possible. As a result, it encouraged some people to make such a request. This led to a certain amount of confusion and demoralization. Most men wanted to stay but the opening of a door to early return was somewhat discomfiting. So it was a sad state of affairs for a time. That was one of the things that Clark had in mind when he asked me to come back to the outfit. He felt that there was a need to deal with this matter personally and politically in order to stabilize the situation in the squadron. Clark thought that it was necessary to help keep the men together as much as possible. He hoped that the military command would not grant the wishes of those who wanted to go home.

It turned out that the men who wanted to go home, the small group, was transferred back to the international brigade base at Albacete for reassignment. This meant that they were not going to go home.

MW: How many were there, do you have any idea?

Sennett: I think there were six or seven men all told. There were a few more people who wanted to go home, but once it came to making an official request, they had second thoughts about it and they decided to stay. Actually, we only learned of one of the Englishmen who, for some reason, did get home.

MW: The others were reassigned?

Sennett: They were reassigned.

MW: What other kinds of outfits?

Sennett: I think all the others ended up in the infantry.

MW: Did you know about this? When you were out there, did you find out about any of this subsequently?

Sennett: Oh, yes. We found out about it while still in Spain. In fact, we learned that there never was authorization given for repatriation at any level.

MW: Then somewhere along the line, somebody deceived those guys into believing that they could go home when what happened to them was that they were transferred to really what amounted to a more dangerous assignment in the infantry.

Sennett: Yes, it was a form of deception. It was a poor way to deal with that matter. I believe that the regimental officer in charge who encouraged the movement didn't want them to go home but wanted to determine how many men were involved.

MW: Are you talking about the commissar now, Steck?

Sennett: No, this was the military commander.

MW: Of the regiment?

Sennett: Of the regiment, that's right.

MW: Who was the Spaniard at this point?

Sennett: His name was Manuel Bragada, who was temporarily with the outfit and acted as the military commander at that time, but may have, in fact, believed that they would be allowed to go.

MW: You don't really know what his motivation was?

Sennett: I'm not sure. I would say that it would be either that he believed that they would go home and he said, "All right, if you want to go home, do it. It's going to be better for the outfit [if] the people who want to go home leave." That's what he said and I remember that he told a few of us that.

MW: But somebody somewhere made the decision simply to not let them go home, but to go back into the war.

Sennett: That is correct.

MW: Do you know what happened to any of them ultimately?

Sennett: No.

MW: Did they survive the war?

Sennett: One of them went into the infantry and was captured and, therefore, survived the war after that, yes. I can't remember about the others.

MW: Do the Lincoln Brigade people stay in touch with each other now? Are there people who are now excluded from that camaraderie of the brigade--outcast types who really didn't stick it out or who behaved in a dishonorable fashion?

Sennett: The only ones who have been excluded from the organization called the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade are those who turned government informers. Anyone who went to Spain and fought on the Republican side is entitled to be part of the veterans organization known as the VALB.

MW: But an historian assessing the behavior of the Lincoln Brigade and the Americans who went there and, say, comparing it with the Italians and the Germans who were on the other side or with national contingents from other countries and so forth, would be interested in addressing questions of morale and dedication among other things. Any military unit, obviously, will have some people who have second thoughts or who demonstrate cowardice under fire. That is inevitable in any military situation. How would you assess the behavior of the brigade members and their dedication to the cause?

Sennett: I don't know what statistics might be in conscript armies in terms of those who desert and those who, of course, are cowardly in the face of the enemy. Casualty statistics among those who volunteered to go to Spain from America are extremely high. It is estimated that we had close to three thousand people who went and that about fourteen hundred were killed. When you think of the fact that usually more people are wounded in battle than are killed, this is an unusually high figure. It means that in terms of the number of battles, the days actually spent in action were much greater than what one might call a "normal" war. Many people went back into action after being wounded.

Now, I know this also happens elsewhere, but this is the other side of the coin to the very few, let's say, who defected and had a change of heart. Basically, the volunteers were soldiers who suffered from a lack of military training. If they

Sennett: had been better trained, and if they had had the kinds of weapons to make it possible to conduct the kind of fight to match that of the enemy, then it seems to me even that the casualties would have been smaller. But that wasn't to be. When I try to think of the number of people that I know who deserted, it's so small when you think of the three thousand volunteers who served. I believe that their desertion statistics would have to be a lot lower than it was where most soldiers are conscripted.

MW: But you personally knew of soldier who deserted?

Sennett: Yes, I did. I personally would know of probably less than half a dozen cases. But that covers Americans in other outfits as well.

MW: All of them Americans?

Sennett: Yes, that I knew. Obviously, there were some beyond those I knew but it wasn't very great.

ASSESSING CASUALTY STATISTICS

MW: I agree that the statistical comparisons are misleading. Everybody seizes on them because statistics are so beautiful to make comparisons with, even though there are distortions. One of the reasons why there were a number of deaths in the war was that medical assistance as not as great as it is now; that is, people who died in the battlefield might not have had to die there if they had gotten proper medical attention.

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MW: What was your knowledge of the kind of medical attention that was available on the battlefield.

Sennett: I don't know what kind of facilities there actually were other than in the hospitals. After all, on the battlefield you had medics and first aid stations. The medics who were moving up with the troops were in the front lines themselves. But there was generally a shortage of trained personnel on the front to take care of the men who were wounded. International aid was given by volunteers from many countries. American doctors and American nurses went to Spain. Ambulances, medical supplies, and funds were contributed by the friends of the Spanish democracy. We saw evidence of that aid and it was very helpful. I got the feeling that there was probably more medical attention available to the internationals than there was to the rest of the Spanish army.

MW: So if you were hit on the battlefield, could you yell, "Medic!" and somebody would come take care of you?

Sennett: Generally, you could, and obviously medics would get hit, too. Medics were on the front lines and when they did, there had to be other people who substituted for them, even those without training. Of course, if you could get a person off the field of action down to a first aid station just in back of the lines, that person had an excellent chance to survive.

MW: Okay, we have covered a lot of the war and we are at the point where the brigades have been asked to leave. Have we touched on everything that you think is important during that period? Is there any wrap-up that you want to do?

Sennett: No. I think we can end that at this point.

V Resuming Civilian Life

[Interview 5: September 18, 1981]##

COMING HOME

Sennett: Those of us in the First Regiment de Tren were told that any one of us could report to a governmental agency in the city that happened to be the closest to our base to present ourselves for repatriation. With our particular group there was a kind of dribbling out; it wasn't done as a body. Some of us had some unfinished work with military units of the Fifth Army, while others had completed theirs.

I was among the last of those who were left in our group and presented myself to the Spanish authorities in Barcelona. There I was given documentation and a small sum of Spanish money to get across the Spanish border into France. With some other volunteers I was told to dress up as a railroad worker in order to cross the Pyrenees on a freight train. We crossed the border without incident and, on the French side, we walked to the passenger train station where we bought our tickets to Paris. There were four of us in my group and we managed to get to Paris safely. This was not the case with some other volunteers who were stopped by local police, interrogated, and imprisoned for illegally crossing the border. They were given thirty-day sentences, served their time, and then were allowed to go on to Paris.

MW: What kind of papers did you have?

Sennett: The only paper I had at that time--I didn't have my passport because the passports were stored in Paris--was a government document given me as a soldier of the Spanish Republic for a furlough to go to Mexico. That was the only document that I carried with me, but I never had to use it.

MW: So you didn't have to show it to anybody, you just simply got on the train and off you went and you got to Paris safely?

Sennett: That's right. When I got to Paris, the committee that had been expediting the trip of those who were on their way to Spain from the United States and other countries also arranged for our passage aboard ship to return to the United States. We were booked on the S.S. President Roosevelt. It was part of the American President Lines' fleet. The trip took ten days crossing the ocean, twice the time taken by my trip from the United States to France. When we landed in New York I was given enough money for food and bus fare back to my home in Chicago.

MW: Was the return passage anything like the passage going over or was it entirely different? Did you try to disguise the group and were people instructed not to look like veterans and that sort of thing?

Sennett: No longer did we worry about disguising the group. We were Americans going home with American passports even though technically we had violated the conditions of those passports. There were not too many of us on board. When we went to Spain, there were 250 of us on the Ile de France, but I don't think that there were more than twenty-five of us on the President Roosevelt, for the trip home.

It became obvious to me that I was not a seafaring man. Again, seasickness hit me on the first day out and I think I was seasick about nine days out of the ten-day crossing. Those of us who didn't live in New York were quite anxious to get home, so we didn't spend much time in the city. I returned to Chicago in the middle of October of 1938. Shortly thereafter Gussie and I decided to get legally married as an expression of our willingness to solidify our relationship as a married couple and to plan for children in the family.

MW: You were living together before you went to Spain?

Sennett: Yes, we had been living together before I left.

MW: Was the readjustment with her difficult?

Sennett: No, we had frequent communication while I was in Spain and we were very happy to see each other again.

MW: Was she as politically involved and active when you returned as she had been before you left?

- Sennett: Oh yes, to some extent even more. She was active in the Young Communist League and additionally had become involved with the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.
- MW: The Friends had been in existence during the war for quite some time?
- Sennett: Yes, it helped to develop support for the Spanish Republic in the States and to provide brigade members in Spain with some creature comforts.

ORGANIZING MEAT PACKERS FOR THE YCL

- Sennett: After a couple of weeks of vacation on my return, the YCL asked me to move into the area "back of the yards" and become the section organizer of the packinghouse section of the Young Communist League.
- MW: The yards being the stockyards?
- Sennett: The stockyards. This was a national concentration point of the Communist party and the Young Communist League in one of the basic industries of the country. The Chicago stockyards had the largest slaughterhouses for cattle, sheep, and hogs anywhere in the world. The giants of the industry were located there--Wilson & Company, Armour, Swift, Cudahy--in addition to a number of smaller processing and fertilizer plants.

There were over 50,000 packinghouse workers employed in the Chicago yards and its periphery. I recall reading The Jungle, by Upton Sinclair, who exposed the abominable conditions in the packinghouse plants in the early part of the century. Contaminated meat was processed and sold at that time because there were no federal agencies to supervise and certify the purity of the meats. Sinclair's expose helped those activists seeking to change conditions to bring about federal inspection of meat. However it took union organization in the thirties to bring about basic improvements in wages, hours, and working conditions for the packinghouse workers.

But when I moved in to the stockyard area, the greater part of the thousands of packinghouse workers in Chicago were already unionized by the new United Packinghouse Workers organization.

- MW: Let me interrupt for a moment. How did you feel about this assignment? Did you have any say in it or were you just told where to go and you went, no questions asked?

Sennett: When I got back from Spain, I expected to undertake some sort of assignment with the Young Communist League and I really didn't have any special ideas in mind. I thought that I would like to get into a labor union directly and perhaps work in one of the large plants or even work within the union structure if that were possible. I discussed that with my comrades in the Communist party and the Young Communist League and the suggestion was that I go to work with the YCL organization in this industrial section as a substitute.

MW: And that seemed like a good idea to you?

Sennett: I thought it was a good idea.

MW: You didn't have any other hopes or plans that you wanted to pursue, which were derailed by this particular assignment?

Sennett: No, I did not. The massive organizing drive carried on by the CIO was in the Chicago packinghouses and was made possible by the participation of a number of Communists who were openly on the union organizing staff in addition to those Communists who were workers in the plant and active in organizing their departments and plants.

An outstanding Communist at that time was Herbert March who had been a Young Communist League organizer in Kansas. He had lived in New York and taken the YCL assignment in Kansas. He then moved to Chicago and settled there, raising a family. He became active in the stockyards as a worker in the Armour and Company plant and became one of the leaders of the union. Eventually, he was elected as the director of the Chicago district, which included some plants outside Illinois.

My job as a section organizer was to coordinate the work of the Young Communist League clubs and the section committee of which I was in charge. This involved support for the building and consolidation of the union through YCL members who were union members in getting community groups to back the union's efforts. There was a broad-based coalition that had been organized known as the Back of the Yards Council and YCL members were active in its work.

MW: Let me interrupt for a moment. Can you tell me what the Back of the Yards Council was? Did you say it was a coalition?

Sennett: The Back of the Yards Council was a neighborhood support coalition. At a time when the employers were resisting unionization, there were a number of prominent citizens, religious leaders, and political leaders and others who indicated that they believed in

- Sennett: the right of working people to union organization. In the thirties, unions had to battle for the right even to carry out what was established by law--their right to be union members. The employers were very harsh in their treatment of those who joined unions. And public support was a great asset in bringing pressure to bear to achieve union recognition around the country and in the back of the yards. Movements around the country gave vocal and other forms of support in behalf of those who were being organized by the CIO.
- WM: Now, were these support groups organized by the Communist party or had they just simply developed or were organized by someone else?
- Sennett: Communists were not the principal organizers of the Council but they certainly were among the best and most effective organizers.
- MW: Would you call it a Communist front?
- Sennett: No, definitely not. A very well-known national figure was behind that organization. His name was Saul Alinsky and he had a lot to do with the development of the Back of the Yards Council. Catholic Bishop Bernard Sheil became a staunch supporter of the local council and of the organization of the CIO nationally. Bishop Sheil worked very closely with the Back of the Yards Council and was its chairman for some time.
- MW: Were you aware of any Trotskyist movement at this stage?
- Sennett: I was aware of the Trotskyist movement in some places, but they were a very small group of people, as I recall, around the yards. There were some members of the union who were members of the Socialist Workers party--that's the Trotskyist organization. They were not in key positions and there were not any great numbers of them. I was also a member of the Communist party and a member of its section committee in packing.
- MW: When did you join the Communist party?
- Sennett: I joined the Communist party when I was twenty-one and I joined the Young Communist League when I was sixteen. I don't remember the exact year, but I assume it was 1935 or 1936, just before I went to Spain.
- MW: So all this time that you were working in the Young Communist League, you were a Communist party member?
- Sennett: Yes, since the year of 1935 or '36.

MW: Can I ask you a little bit about that? Did you have to go through a candidate membership or was it difficult to become a Communist then or did you just decide, "I want to be a Communist," and sign up?

Sennett: No. As a member of the Young Communist League, I had good credentials for joining and becoming a member. All that was necessary at that time, I believe, was that two members of the Communist party sponsor your membership. It was then voted on and decided upon by the local Communist branch.

MW: So would you say that it was hard to get in or not hard to get in?

Sennett: It was not hard to get in. It was very easy to get in and all that was needed was the word of two members of the Communist party.

MW: Was there a sense in the YCL--first of all, did other people in the YCL know that you were a Communist party member? Was that generally known?

Sennett: Yes, surely.

MW: That wasn't something that you hid?

Sennett: No.

MW: Did that give you some kind of elite status in the movement?

Sennett: Well, it only indicated that that was the course which all young Communists eventually take when they come of age. There were some Communist party members who were young enough to be in the Young Communist League, but either they were not doing work among other young people or simply preferred to be part of the "senior" organization. Even though the Communist party didn't want to refer to itself as the "parent" group, it was just that in effect.

MW: Did you have to pay dues to the Communist party at that time?

Sennett: I think I did.

MW: Can you remember what they were?

Sennett: No, I don't. They were very low and I think there was a special lower dues payment for those who were members of the Young Communist League.

MW: It wasn't a hardship?

Sennett: Not at all.

MW: Was Gussie a member then?

Sennett: I think she joined the Communist party at about the same time.

MW: So both of you then--your political activities were very parallel, weren't they?

Sennett: Our political ideology was the same, but our activities weren't necessarily in the same place. Gussie became a secretary for the district council of the packinghouse workers union. As a member of the section committee of the Communist party, I worked with Harry Shaw, who was a full-time organizer for the Communist party in charge of the packinghouse section until he took on another assignment. Then a new Communist organizer, Mike Kingsley, took his place. Mike and I became very close friends in addition to political associates. He was later killed in World War II.

The Communist party and Young Communist League were helping to organize workers with the packinghouse workers union. Several leading organizers and members of the packinghouse workers union were known to be Communists.

We Communists attempted, through education in the union and through independent efforts, to break some of the racial barriers that existed. For example, a large percentage of packinghouse workers were black, but generally they lived outside the back-of-the-yards neighborhood. The workers living in back of the yards, in the main, were Catholic of Polish, Irish, and Lithuanian extraction. These workers accepted the need for a union together with their black brothers, but they generally drew the line at living in the same neighborhood with them. Communists in the union would try to break down the segregated barriers in the community but were not too successful in that period. Outside of the union, the Communist party openly advocated, through its literature and open forums, the need for integrated neighborhoods. But that matter was put on the back burner because it could not be carried out in practice in the earlier period of the union's formation.

MW: There was jut too much hostility toward the integration of neighborhoods to make it worthwhile to attempt to change these attitudes?

Sennett: Yes, there was. Now, the union had a mixed leadership. There were blacks on the staff and, of course, blacks in the leadership of the plants. But the union did not feel that it was able to conduct a campaign to break through and make it possible for blacks to live in the same neighborhood. That came much later.

MW: Now, the Communists during this period were going into the unions that had been organized by the CIO?

Sennett: Yes, they were.

MW: You weren't organizing new unions or competitive unions, but you were going into those unions and working within them to increase their membership and strengthen their organization?

Sennett: That is correct.

MW: Did you become known during this period as a left-wing faction of the unions? Were there concerns about factionalism and were the Communists identified as having a particular style or approach that was a minority approach?

Sennett: In the packinghouse workers union that was not the case in the thirties. This may have been the situation in other industries, but the fact that Communists had been very well rooted in the plants themselves and were stewards, lower echelon leaders, and rank-and-file workers made it possible for them to develop a very solid base and there was no divisiveness on the matter of the role of Communists. Everything that the Communists did was aimed at strengthening the union and they were recognized [as] among the best union builders and the best organizers that the union had.

MW: Was there any red baiting within the union?

Sennett: Oh, yes. There were always right-wing elements and red baiting at certain levels, red baiting in some local unions, at the district level and at the national level at times. But it was not dominant, not in the thirties.

MW: You could really still function? Even though there was some of that, you could function effectively in the union?

Sennett: Yes, you could.

MW: Were you being paid by the Young Communist League?

Sennett: I was paid a small income to carry on my work. But obviously it was not enough to make ends meet even though Gussie was working, so my brother, Charlie, offered me part-time work in a billiard and bowling supply business that he owned. There I learned how to re-cover cloth on pool tables, to set up pool tables, to do repair work, replacement, installation work, and to plug and drill bowling balls.

MW: Did that have anything to do with the fact that you now have your own billiard room in your house in Tiburon? [laughs]

Sennett: At least I do have a table. My pool-playing days started earlier during the Depression on the west side.

NATIONAL CONVENTION OF THE YOUNG COMMUNIST LEAGUE--1939

Sennett: In May of 1939, I attended the ninth national convention of the Young Communist League as a delegate. This convention was held in New York and I recall the theme of a report by Henry Winston, the administrative secretary then of the Young Communist League. He entitled it "Character Building and Education in the Spirit of Socialism." This was something that was probably deeply embedded in my consciousness because I seem to remember the exact title and some of the report that was made, and it made a very deep impression on me.

MW: I was just about to ask you whether you recalled that with precision from memory or whether you had gone through some old papers and maybe came across it recently?

Sennett: I did go through the report by Winston to jog my memory a bit. I wanted to see whether what I remembered was what actually took place and I re-read that report. It was a small pamphlet issued by the International Publishers after that convention. Henry Winston emphasized that the Young Communist League was an educational organization and that its membership at that time was 22,000. He encouraged the members of the Young Communist League to study, to burn the midnight oil, as he called it. He said that study meant more than just Marxism, that it meant studying history and geography, the sciences and language. He talked about character building and encouraged members of the Young Communist League to help others become more moral human beings and said they should consider their role in life with their fellow workers, their neighbors, and with society as a whole. He said that the Young Communists believed in living life with a purpose and that that had been the source of their strength. He encouraged them to be humane, productive human beings and to consider not only their own needs and their own desires, but to work toward a common effort to provide the necessities of life and peace for all of humanity.

Henry Winston is currently the chairman of the Communist party of the United States.

MW: Wasn't he one of the twelve Communist leaders indicted under the Smith Act?

Sennett: That's true. Twelve were indicted and eleven were tried and found guilty.

MW: He subsequently went to jail, too, didn't he?

Sennett: He went to prison and subsequently served a five-year term plus a three-year term.

MW: Why do you suppose this speech made such an impression on you? It sounds to me a little bit like a graduation speech. There is not an especially radical notion here and there is not an expression of values that you haven't already articulated as having believed yourself before. How did this come to impress you?

Sennett: Perhaps I could say facetiously that it may be because I never graduated from anything but grammar school and I may not have heard those kinds of speeches. Nevertheless, in view of my work and experience in the Young Communist League, up to that point in 1939, it helped to add to my general view about humanity and the need for a communist society.

MW: Was it because of the way he delivered it or was it the content of the speech?

Sennett: It was the content of the speech. It wasn't like a super patriotic appeal even though it was patriotic from the point of view of Communist consciousness. But it came across because I was very involved and I felt proud to realize that my dedication and activities had a social, moral, and philosophical purpose.

MW: The main themes you have described were humanitarian service and dedication to education.

Sennett: That is correct.

A PARTY EDUCATION IN MARXIST-LENINIST THOUGHT

Sennett: And not long after the Young Communist League convention, my own education in Marxism was deepened when I was sent to the Communist party training school held in the Midwest in the fall of 1939. It was a six-week school with about thirty-five students in attendance and--

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Sennett: The party training school was held at a very pleasant place near Chicago called Camp Lincoln. This was a left-wing resort used by many Communists and others on the left for vacation purposes and

Sennett: outings during the summer and holidays. We had the good fortune to be able to live in the camp for six weeks while we were attending that school.

The Communist party's top-flight educator, Jake Mindel, more affectionately known as "Pop," was the school's director. He was one of the educators who testified in the Communist trial of the eleven Smith Act defendants on the theory and meaning of Marxism.

MW: You say he was an outstanding Communist educator. Do you mean he was a member of the party?

Sennett: He was a member of the Communist party, yes, and he was an outstanding Marxist scholar. He organized the curriculum for our special school as he had for many others around the country. He was outstanding as a teacher in "translating" Marx so that Marxism could be understood more easily even by people with little formal education. He was very personable, very helpful, and very interested in the progress of his students.

MW: What was his field? Did he have some status in a university or something?

Sennett: No, he did not. He was a university graduate. I don't know his special field, but he was at home with philosophy, economics, and sociology. His life was dedicated to Marxist education and training.

MW: I see, so he didn't have educational credentials of any kind. He may not have had any formal degrees but he certainly had educational credentials.

MW: You don't happen to know how he acquired his erudition?

MW: No, I don't. He was foreign born and I understood that he attended the university in Czarist Russia. Our studies included political economy, relevant selections from the works of Marx and Engels, the philosophy of socialism, the Negro question in the United States, history of the Communist party of the Soviet Union, and the history of the American labor movement.

MW: Now, did he teach all of these or did you have different instructors?

Sennett: No, we had different instructors. He coordinated and led selected discussions.

- MW: What kind of credentials did these people have? Were they people with standard academic credentials or were they all out of the movement and taught within the movement?
- Sennett: No, some had academic credentials but I frankly find it hard to recall some names or their credentials.
- MW: Do you remember any of the texts? You studied the history of the Communist party of the Soviet Union and there is a very famous book published in the Soviet Union, which subsequently became very controversial after the famous speech.
- Sennett: We used that book, History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.
- MW: Did you react to the descriptions of Stalin in that book in any way? I guess a better way to put it is to ask if you remember reacting to anything that you read in that book.
- Sennett: I do not recall having any questions about the book or its veracity. I considered it a very valuable contribution to an understanding of the Russian revolution.
- MW: In this process of education within the party, was there a lot of challenging of ideas or did it have a kind of catechism quality in which you were informed of how things were and you accepted it without question? Did the students at these kinds of schools raise questions and argue with the instructors?
- Sennett: There wasn't much argumentation, but the students did raise a lot of questions. However, they were mainly questions of clarification. There were no great debates as I recall, no challenging of the text or the criteria that were presented.
- MW: On reflection now, does that strike you as unusual?
- Sennett: It certainly does. After going through a period of disengagement from the Communist party and looking back at my classes on Marxism, I recognize and realize that what we were doing was being enlightened more on what the party line was or on what the textbooks stated rather than challenging any concepts or precepts. In studying Marx's works on the other hand, there were many questions not easily understood, based upon our practical experience or by those of us with limited formal education. It wasn't that we questioned Marx; we exalted him, but Das Kapital is far from an elementary textbook on the structure of the capitalist system. But when it came to the texts of Lenin, Stalin, Foster, Browder, and others--I found it a lot easier to follow and to apply their logic and teachings to the world I knew and to my work as a Communist functionary.

MW: Is there anything more you want to say about this school?

Sennett: I enjoyed the camaraderie at the school as well as the concentration on study. It gave me a better grounding in Marxism and made me realize the enjoyment and value of more consistent reading of the Marxist classics and other literature as well.

MW: I think we mentioned earlier that you had another school earlier, didn't you?

Sennett: Yes, in 1932, shortly after I joined the Young Communist League, I attended a four-week school.

MW: Now, these schools were a major part of your education. You hadn't had much formal education and so they played a very big role presumably in shaping your whole world view.

Sennett: They certainly did.

MW: I am interested, therefore, in how this works with these kinds of political movements. It seems to me also a very important kind of device to preserve the loyalty and solidarity of the movement. I would guess that these educational techniques build strong movement cadres.

Sennett: Yes, they do.

MW: --And are pretty effective.

One other point I wanted to ask you. Did your studies of Marxist theory mean that your political dialogue within the party about strategy and tactics tended to become articulated in a new language? Was the study of Marxism and Leninism also the process of acquiring a new jargon and a new technique of discourse, and did you talk about dialectics and the dialectical process and all of the catch words of Marxist-Leninist theory as a result of this kind of an education? Was there competition within the movement to be better grounded in theory and that sort of thing or would you say that would be an exaggeration of what it did?

Sennett: I wouldn't say there was that kind of competition. There was obviously an emphasis on being better grounded and there was an effort, especially by those in the leadership, to educate themselves more and to read more widely. That was a very positive thing. The jargon that came along with it was something that one absorbed from Communist literature and propaganda. Discussion on the kind of language we used in our press, in leaflets, and in our literature did come up for criticism from time to time. Some of our leaders rationalized the use of sectarian language by saying that Marxism does have a special language. That was because, like

Sennett: other sciences, Marxism also had a special way of communicating its theory and practice. Instead of popularizing Marxism by the use of more popular language, exaggerated "revolutionary" jargon was substituted as a "militant" form of communication by copying the style of sloganeering and the rhetoric of Russian and other foreign revolutionaries.

On the other hand, there were a number of Communist writers who attempted to communicate so that they could be better understood. Their prose was more down to earth and readable.

MW: For example, would you use a phrase like "dictatorship of the proletariat" when you were talking to the packinghouse workers?

Sennett: Yes, some phrases like that were used by Communists, particularly in the twenties and early thirties. The people who became union leaders, in the main, used a more down-to-earth style in their speeches and in their writing than most of those who were Communist party functionaries. If you were working in what was called a mass organization, a non-Communist organization, then you adapted [to] the kind of style of language used in that group or organization. But in the inner structure of the party, there was more use of jargon than there was on the outside of that structure.

MW: Were debates within the party ever waged--debates about strategy and tactics--on the basis of quotations from the Marxist literature or the Stalinist writings during that period? Was there what is sometimes called quotation mongering as a device for justifying what you did? Did you have to justify what you wanted to do by references to the holy scripture?

Sennett: You didn't have to, but it seemed to be an accepted form for many since Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and later Mao Tse-Tung were considered the giants of the movement. Obviously quotations from those sources came in very handy to try to prove a point. The debate could center on whether you interpreted their language correctly or whether what they stated meant what you said it was, and as a result there could be a debate over the meaning of a particular quotation or someone would find perhaps another quotation to disprove the first. Yes, quotations were used very often in speeches, in reports, and in internal debates.

MW: So it would be very difficult to function as an effective leader within the movement without having a fairly good command of that literature and the basic theory, would it?

Sennett: Unfortunately, some of the most dogmatic leaders, those who spoke and used jargon, were advanced into leadership because of their presumed great knowledge of Marxism.

DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM IN PRINCIPLE AND PRACTICE

- MW: That's very interesting. Did you come across during this period the term "democratic centralism?"
- Sennett: That was a basic organizational concept of the Leninist party and it was used whenever there was any discussion about the nature of the organization of the Communist party.
- MW: What was your understanding then of its meaning?
- Sennett: This was considered the most democratic form of organization. The membership was theoretically the basic authority in deciding the program, policies, and direction of the party. They elected the delegates from the clubs to the district conventions and the representatives at that level elected the delegates to the national convention. That gathering then elected the national committee and the smaller political bureau was elected by that body. The policy decisions made by the political bureau and/or the national committee would then become the policy of the entire party.
- MW: Did you feel that was democratic?
- Sennett: I did at that time.
- MW: Do you think now that it was?
- Sennett: In retrospect I think it is one of the greatest structural weaknesses of the Communist party, that it inhibits genuine democracy and led to a repressive bureaucracy particularly in countries where the Communist parties are in power. In countries, such as the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe, democratic centralism was in practice, a leadership from the top down which permitted the political bureau or secretariat to be all-powerful, to punish dissenters, and to deny basic democratic rights to their people.
- MW: But still, you had the impression at that time that it was democratic.
- Sennett: I certainly did. I accepted the theory of democratic centralism and did not realize that the practice was quite the opposite.
- MW: And I guess most everyone else did, too.
- Sennett: Yes, they did.

MW: How do you explain that? It sounds as though your understanding was that the rank and file would have some input. You didn't say anything about votes being taken among the rank and file. In any case, they would have some input but that, in effect, they would delegate authority to the leaders and in the absence of any question directly put to the rank and file, the leaders would have the authority to decide more or less what had to be done under most circumstances. Is that a correct description of it?

Sennett: That was pretty much the case. I felt, and I think this was the thinking of most of the people who were members of the Communist party, that you couldn't run the organization by referendum, that the rank and file had an opportunity to express itself at branch or club meetings, that it then was represented by virtue of the fact that it voted for those who would be in the structure above them--that is, the section committees and the district committees. Eventually they were able to be represented through the national conventions and the elected national committee. On its face, there does appear to be much wrong with that in the structure of a democratically functioning organization. But in a party which has political power and where the membership must obey the dictates of the leadership and the principle of organization is based on monolithic political lines, personal dictatorship can be substituted for collective leadership and adherence to democracy.

Obviously, I can see the fallacy of that kind of thinking today, but I thought at the time, when I accepted it, that it was a democratic way to function and that the leadership, in practice, had a lot more experience and knew a lot more than the general membership, that it was in a much better position to make such policy decisions for those less experienced and less enlightened.

MW: Referring to the military structure in Spain--military structure is, by its nature not democratic--this party organization was more rigid than the structure in Spain, right?

Sennett: Oh, yes.

MW: --In the sense that you elected your officers here, whereas in Spain you didn't and so it was somewhere between a democratic model and a military model.

Sennett: At a later date in my party membership, I came to realize that the whole question of democracy was one which we didn't understand properly at the time that we accepted the concept of democratic centralism. It is always very difficult to do things democratically. But nevertheless, the methods and structure and organization cannot be based upon military principles. The concept came from the experience and structure of the Bolshevik party in Russia. It was conceived by Lenin and based on Russian

Sennett: conditions particularly during their civil war. Obviously, many forms of organization required during a period of war and counterrevolution should long ago have been discarded. And a bureaucracy and dictatorship can only be avoided when the people have control of their own destinies in the villages, the workshop, and in government at all levels.

MW: Without getting our time frame too much out of joint here, I would like to ask you at this point when you first began to have some doubt about democratic centralism?

Sennett: I'm not really sure about the date, but I would say that there were times when I was a little frustrated about certain decisions that were made. I can't remember what those decisions were. That certainly happened in the late forties and the early fifties, and I considered that as a disciplined Communist and as a disciplined part of the leadership of the Communist party, I had to accept certain decisions even though I might swallow hard. But the real change obviously came about as a result of the Khrushchev report about which we will speak later.

MW: Discipline was an important concept during this period. I guess you recognized the results that can accrue from disciplined activity.

Sennett: Yes, it certainly was.

MW: It was kind of a key word of the movement at that period.

Sennett: At all times we were conscious of the need to have a unified and what we called monolithic organization. That was another part of the strictures and the structure of the Communist party. I didn't really think as hard as I should have, and did at a later date, about what it meant to be monolithic, but obviously we therefore tried to prevent any kind of factionalism or any divisiveness and we wanted to root it out very quickly whenever it showed its head.

MW: Is that what monolithic meant--no factionalism?

Sennett: Monolithic meant that we would have an organization of like-thinking and like-acting people and as a result, those who did not accept the decisions that were made democratically as we saw them were disruptive and were preventing us from being the kind of effective monolithic organization which would be able to carry out its tasks.

MW: Would you say pragmatically speaking that for that time and period, despite the criticisms of it that you have already made, that it worked?

Sennett: It worked for those who remained in the party and for the activities that we carried on to the extent that we did. It was not a process that prevented Communists from being effective. In other words, despite the contradictions inherent in that kind of structure, Communists were able to carry on very effective and meaningful work in the labor movement, in the neighborhoods, in mass organizations--wherever they worked. But obviously, there were a lot of people who joined the Communist party and Young Communist League and [who] left very quickly. There was always a great turnover of membership who could not either adjust themselves or conform to the method of Communist organization and discipline.

MW: Did you have an image of the effectiveness of the Communist party at that period relative to the Socialist party or to other progressive movements.

Sennett: Yes, the Communist party was the most effective movement on the left as compared with the Socialist party and sects such as the Trotskyists, the Socialist Labor Party and others.

MW: Okay, let's go back to that period of the school and what happened afterwards.

Sennett: After the school, I began to teach more classes. I had taught some elementary classes earlier and eventually I became one of the regulars at the Chicago Workers' School. I taught classes in Marxism-Leninism, but I recall teaching some classes on the subject "what is philosophy" and elements of political economy. I also taught some of the classes in the history of the Russian revolution based on that book. I was able to take on the work of Marxist education, in addition to my organizational work with the section committee of the Young Communist League.

RUSSIAN-GERMAN NONAGGRESSION PACT, INVASIONS OF POLAND, FINLAND

Sennett: Some of my thoughts about the Soviet Union were disturbing and confusing to me when the Russians signed a nonaggression pact with the Germans in 1939. I was stunned that such a thing could happen and my inner reaction was there was something I didn't understand, that I had to clarify, which was the usual kind of thought as a result of my training within the Communist movement: What is it that the leaders knew that I didn't understand? Therefore, I accepted on faith the position that the Soviet Union took this step as a defensive measure, that the democracies had refused to unite with the Soviet Union in a common front against Fascist

Sennett: aggression. The Soviet Union had made many overtures to Great Britain and France and the United States on the basis of the need to unite against Hitler, and it was rebuffed. The Russians expected that war would break out. They wanted to protect their rear and prevent such a war from being directed against them, since the democracies appeared to be conniving to turn the energies and direction of the Nazis toward war with the Soviet Union.

I came to accept the German-Soviet pact as a very clever and positive move instead of as a negative and backward step by the Soviet Union.

MW: But initially it must have been pretty tough, given the fact that you had been fighting in effect against the Nazis and the Italians in Spain.

Sennett: True. But eventually my experience in Spain supported my thinking about the reasoning of the Soviet action. If the allies had united in support of Spain, then obviously there never would have been a German-Soviet pact, just as there need not have been a World War II. This point of view contributed to the rationale that I developed about the German-Soviet pact, and even at this point of my life, I believe that it is not a clear-cut matter of black or white. This is also true about the invasion of Poland by Germany after the signing of the Soviet-Nazi pact. The Russians moved in to keep the Nazis from taking over all of Poland. I don't believe the Russians helped the Germans to destroy and conquer Poland. If the Russians had not moved into Poland, the Germans would have taken over the whole country in short order.

I was also able to rationalize the Russian-Finnish war, which broke out in November of 1939. While Finland put up a valiant struggle, and I had some misgivings about the Russian attack, I also accepted the inevitability of the eventual enlargement of the war which would involve the Soviet Union and the United States. I accepted the rationale that Russia was covering its rear by taking over strategic bases in Finland that it felt it needed to defend itself.

When the Russians themselves were attacked in June of 1941, I felt that all of the steps that they had taken beforehand with respect to the Soviet-Nazi pact, the invasion of Poland, and the Russian-Finnish War were justified. I believed that the Russians were now in a much better position to defend themselves because of the actions they had taken earlier.

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MW: So the various historical events of the thirties affected your way of thinking about the world and about the Communist movement?

Sennett: I realized later that these events, which I was able to rationalize, had a very negative impact on the Communist movement in the United States. Up to that period, the Communist movement was involved in building unions and dealing with unemployed struggles and the problems of the black people and other issues and it was making headway. It was winning friends and influencing broad masses of people. The actions by the Soviet Union in Finland and Poland and the Nazi-Soviet pact, which the American Communists were defending, were turning many people against the Communists.

TRAINING FOR DEFENSE WORK

Sennett: But this changed after the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.

MW: By Germany?

Sennett: --By Germany. I decided to get into a defense plant and I undertook to develop my skills in machine shop work. I entered a defense training school full time just before our country became involved in World War II some time in October of 1941. I signed up for a ten-week course to become a machine operator.

MW: Now, defense training school, this wasn't a Communist party school?

Sennett: No, this was a government school, a U.S. government-supported school, and they were using one of the high schools in South Chicago which had the equipment needed for the training courses.

MW: Now, was this your idea or the party's idea?

Sennett: This was my idea. I suggested to the party that I wanted to attend.

MW: Did this mean ending your stockyard work, organizing work?

Sennett: Yes, it did. I was still working with the packing section, but I was not working full time any longer and I enrolled in school full time.

MW: Did you see going to this defense training school as an effort to aid the Soviet Union?

Sennett: I saw going to the defense training school as, first of all, something that would put me into a shop. I would have a trade and I would be able to get into a defense plant since defense plants were being built around Chicago, and I wanted to become a direct

Sennett: participant in union activity. I didn't look upon it simply as aiding the Soviet Union, but it was apparent that the war was spreading and that the United States would inevitably be involved.

MW: All of this was essentially on your own initiative. You were not being a dutiful party comrade who was simply doing what he was told, but this was your idea.

Sennett: Yes.

MW: You consulted the party and the party approved. What would you have done if they had said, "No, we want you to stay with the packinghouse."

Sennett: I think if the party had said no, I would have been disciplined and I would not have gone. But I was able to persuade the party that I should go.

MW: As I recall, you had several occasions where you wanted to do something and you were pretty successful in persuading the party that that was a good idea. You seem to have gotten along well with the party structure. There didn't seem to have been any major conflict between what you wanted to do with your life and what the party thought was appropriate.

Sennett: The party was not hard and fast in its discipline. If an individual had strong feelings about a different job or a different assignment or a different project, the party was amenable to that as long as the party felt that it would not be hurt and that there was somebody else that could take over that particular assignment.

FAMILY LIFE

Sennett: I felt that I needed outside work from a financial point of view as well. My daughter Barbara was born August 11, 1941, and my wife was not able to work for a time. Thus, our expenses were increased while our income was cut. My wife had been the main support of the family, and it was necessary for me to make up for the loss of her income.

MW: Tell me a little bit about your personal life during that period. Did you have enough money?

Sennett: Well, we had enough money to eat adequately and to provide minimally for the family. We didn't have any extra for frills and we just lived from week to week on whatever income there was.

MW: Would you describe yourself as poor?

Sennett: Yes, but not poverty stricken.

MW: But you had two incomes until Barbara was born?

Sennett: No, we didn't have much of an income because mine was not steady. The Young Communist League would probably give me from five to twelve dollars a week. My wife's income at that time was probably fifteen or eighteen dollars a week and sometimes I was able to supplement my income by working at my brother's place.

MW: Do you remember what you paid for rent in those days?

Sennett: I'm not sure, but we always had to have a boarder in the house to help us pay for rent.

MW: How big of a house did you have?

Sennett: We would have two bedrooms generally, so that we could have a paying boarder share an apartment.

MW: A boarder who lived in the other bedroom, too?

Sennett: --Lived in the other bedroom.

MW: And took meals with you?

Sennett: Sometimes the boarder did share meals.

MW: So it was tough going economically.

Sennett: Yes, it was and I therefore felt that it would help to earn a little more money than I could as a functionary. I acquired some skills at my brother's place as a billiard and bowling mechanic. However, I wanted to combine my working skills where I could carry on my political work while helping the war effort and earning a living.

MW: So up to this time, your most affluent period in your life was when you were working at the Chicago world's fair?

Sennett: It certainly was. That was just a period of five months.

MW: Let me ask you just a little bit more about your family life during this period. It seems like a tough life. One would therefore suspect that there would be family tensions as a result of this. How did Gussie react to this kind of life-style?

Sennett: I don't recall that there were family tensions. In fact, I considered that it was not only a meaningful life, but it was a fun life. I enjoyed, I had a whole number of friends in and close to the Communist movement and we were not only busy, but my wife and I shared our political convictions. We struggled, we were active, we worked, we were busy, and we enjoyed our life together. The fact that we were poor and didn't have much money did not result in a stressful relationship.

MW: Did you attend meetings together and were you involved in party and organizational activities together or did you only see her in the morning and the evening?

Sennett: Some meetings we attended together, but most of our meetings were at different places. I spent more time in party work because of the nature of my assignments.

MW: With Barbara's arrival, did that change anything?

Sennett: It changed in the sense that Gussie couldn't work, at least for a time while Barbara was newly born and a baby, and we had to spend more time at home.

MW: So then you went to the defense training school?

Sennett: Yes, I did and, coincidentally, my instructor turned out to be a friend and a party member. His name was Bill Kruck. He was a gregarious redhead who had become a tool- and die maker. We were very happy to meet each other in the classroom and I must say that he was an outstanding instructor and was greatly appreciated by all men in the class.

MW: You were learning tool- and die making?

Sennett: No, one doesn't learn that quickly. Tool- and die making was a four-year apprenticeship program, so that the most that I could learn was the operation of certain machines and be able to operate those machines in that ten-week period. But I became familiar with a drill press (which I knew something about) and with a lathe (which I hadn't used), with a shaper and other machinery and tools. I learned blueprint reading as well. The school was very beneficial and it helped me to get a job very quickly.

MW: You had in effect a trade then when you finished the course?

Sennett: Well, I was considered a machine operator.

MW: So then what happened?

Sennett: I then applied for a job at the Studebaker plant in Chicago. Studebaker was building automobiles at its plant in Indiana, but the Chicago plant had a contract from the government to build parts for airplane engines and they needed a lot of people.

IMPACT OF GERMANY'S INVASION OF RUSSIA

MW: Now, we're talking about the period just before Pearl Harbor, right?

Sennett: No, Pearl Harbor took place while I was going to the defense training school.

MW: Oh, so you were going in December?

Sennett: Yes. When I finished my training it was already 1942. I started work in February of 1942.

MW: Did you have the feeling during that period that the United States was going to get involved in the war?

Sennett: Yes, I did.

MW: Was there that feeling in the party? Was the party pretty much convinced that the United States would get involved in the war?

Sennett: The party was convinced that the United States was going to get into the war. We had called for aid to the Soviet Union and also to our other allies. We didn't know what form our country's entry would take. We hadn't anticipated the attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor.

MW: The German invasion of the Soviet Union was in June of '41, right?

Sennett: Yes, June 22.

MW: Then Pearl Harbor was the following December.

Sennett: Yes, December 7.

MW: In that period before Pearl Harbor, what were you or the Communist party saying about the war?

Sennett: Prior to the invasion of the Soviet Union by the Germans, we were saying that the United States should stay out of the war, that it was an imperialist war. After the invasion, we said that the character of the war had changed and that now it was necessary to

Sennett: defeat Germany. We did not suggest that the United States declare war on Germany. But we did say that the United States should make available all the aid that it possibly could to make it possible to defeat the Germans.

MW: Now, as you know, that flip-flop--sort of an overnight change of policy--I believe they even changed the Daily Worker in the middle of an edition or something. It has been pointed to by the critics of the Communist movement as an example of American subservience to the Soviet Union, that the orders come from the Soviet Union to change the line and the line changes. Do you have any perception during that period that the line was changing as a result of the orders from Moscow?

Sennett: I don't think that orders were necessary and I don't think that orders came from Moscow. We always had talked about the need to defend the Soviet Union. If the Soviet Union was to be attacked, we would, obviously, on that basis call for assistance to the Soviet Union to help defend it.

I think that there was a lot of truth to the fact that the decisions made by the Communist party of the United States were influenced greatly by the decisions made by the Soviet Union with respect to its own policies. The feeling was that the Soviet Union had the correct policy and had the correct line and that we in the United States ought to adapt ourselves to that.

MW: But there wasn't any embarrassment about a war which had been described as an imperialist war suddenly becoming an entirely different kind of war, a defensive war?

Sennett: It was obviously contradictory and it was an embarrassment, but nevertheless we could no longer pursue an antiwar policy. While we made many defensive explanations regarding our about-face, there were many people outside the Communist party who were dismayed by our uncritical support of all Soviet actions and policies.

MW: Now, you described this as something that wasn't terribly difficult to do; that is, that you just simply shifted gears because a new situation arose? A lot of the literature suggests that this was a fairly traumatic kind of problem in the Communist movement, this kind of shifting gears.

Sennett: Shifting gears--changing the line or policy--was generally traumatic. Before the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, there were unofficial discussions by some Communists in the U.S. and abroad that the characterization of the war as imperialist was erroneous and that we should be giving aid to England and France. Obviously, our sympathies were with England, France, Poland, and

Sennett: the other countries invaded by Hitler. We were not happy to see Germany overrunning Europe. Again, there was this conflict within many of us about our true feelings as anti-Fascists, the appeasement policies by the bourgeois democratic nations that led to the outbreak of war, our sympathy for the Soviet Union, and our confusion with the complexities of true interests, strategy, tactics, and cause and effects.

Therefore, when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union, it simplified matters for Communists around the world despite the tragedy this brought to the Russian people. Americans and Russians were now united at long last in a common struggle.

POLITICAL AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AT THE STUDEBAKER PLANT

MW: So, back to the job as a machine operator.

Sennett: The Studebaker plant was located near Cicero in Chicago. It had a union already in existence when I was hired--Local 998 of the United Auto Workers. At last I was a participating member of a significant union directly instead of simply encouraging unionism from the outside. I became the editor of the local monthly union newspaper, called the Studebaker Pilot. I was elected to the bargaining committee, which negotiated the local plant's contract and which was a standing committee to enforce the contract. While I did not make a public declaration that I was a Communist, it was an open secret. (I had to deny my Communist membership in my application in order to get the job.)

It was also a very fulfilling experience for me. I was able to work at producing equipment for the war effort, to help strengthen the union, and to deal with workers' problems by helping to solve them. My attitude in the plant was production for victory and I felt that a motivated union membership would respond to the need for increased production.

MW: I guess there must have been some diminution of anti-Communism during this period, given the fact that we were allied with the Soviet Union and that Communists were in the forefront of patriotism arguing for the war effort and so forth.

Sennett: Anti-Communism was muted somewhat but it still was in evidence at the Studebaker plant. There were factions contending for leadership, and Communism was made an issue by some. We Communists allied ourselves with the non-Communist progressives and

Sennett: moderates. The anti-Communist slate was particularly active when union elections were being held but that group was in the minority.

There was an incident I recall about my activity at Studebaker in reading my FBI files acquired under the Freedom of Information Act which--

MW: Your own personal file?

Sennett: My own personal file, where certain informers reported to the FBI that I had caused slowdowns in production at the plant and that the plant and the war effort were hurt therefore. These were blatant lies. I recall being personally complimented by the plant manager, Bert Fowler, who told the members of the bargaining committee that Studebaker could improve production if more people were as conscientious and concerned as I was. And at a bargaining session in South Bend, Indiana, the chairman of the board and the president of the Studebaker Corporation, Harold Vance and Paul Hoffman, respectively, personally repeated this compliment to me. Those testimonials do not appear in the FBI files; only the lying statements of informers prompted by J. Edgar Hoover's agents appear.

MW: That suggests that the informer must have been a member of the anti-Communist faction.

Sennett: Certainly.

MW: And it was simply a political attack?

Sennett: That is correct. There was also another incident that occurred in the plant as the result of pressure brought to bear by those of us who were progressives. There were blacks being hired in the plant, but as usual the blacks were being hired for the most menial jobs. Most of the blacks started off as janitors. We Communists made an effort, together with our progressive supporters, to upgrade jobs for blacks. We were able to get blacks upgraded to jobs as machine operators. But the hardest nut to crack was the lily white toolroom. That's where the most skilled people worked.

MW: What was the toolroom?

Sennett: This was a special department composed of tool- and die makers, machinists, and other special craftsmen. It was a department, separate from all of the production areas in the plant. We had a member of the Communist party working in the toolroom, Carl Swanson, who was part of our progressive slate as well. He was the chairman of our bargaining committee. Carl was a real

Sennett: craftsman, a good toolmaker. We discovered a black worker, Maxwell Gleaves, working as a machine operator at the plant. He had been previously trained as a toolmaker, but he was not given a job in the toolroom even though he had the necessary qualifications. We decided to make an issue of that and we brought it before the company as a grievance based on discrimination. The company agreed to go along with us, but many of the people in the toolroom--union members--refused to do so.

The union leadership agreed to support Gleaves' bid for the toolroom job despite the opposition of many workers in that department. We informed management that we would back up their transfer and deal with the union members in opposition.

When the transfer took place and Gleaves was brought into the toolroom, most of the men walked out. Carl Swanson and I addressed the men who were leaving, suggesting they reconsider their actions. We warned them that they were violating union policy and they risked being expelled from the union. We pointed out that the rest of the plant supported the union position and would back up our action. The walkout was short-lived. It lasted a couple of days and, though a few toolmakers quit their jobs in protest, the overwhelming majority were back at work within the week. The FBI file entry relating to this incident quotes their favorite informants as saying that I had stirred up hatred between blacks and whites in the plant and that this led to racial actions that further divided the workers and caused slowdowns as a result!

MW: Isn't it possible that that's true in the sense that it did stir up a lot of racial antagonism, didn't it?

Sennett: If stirring up racial antagonisms is the way civil rights and integration efforts are defined then that kind of "racial antagonism" is a positive, democratic need. The end result of our action was that other blacks were brought into the toolroom, with the workers eventually accepting the integration of their department.

MW: So you were really genuinely trying to educate people about integration during this action?

Sennett: Yes, we were.

MW: That I find interesting because, in a sense, that is a kind of diversion from the war effort and supporting the Soviet Union and so forth. Was this a part of a strategy to win over black people?

Sennett: It was part of an ongoing principle, not a planned strategy of the Communist party. We fought to break down racism wherever it showed its head and we carried on that fight for integration in the shop and in the neighborhoods. That program was rarely ever compromised.

MW: Do you think it was a wise strategy at that time?

Sennett: Absolutely. It helped to unite black workers in support of the war effort as well as to break down the barriers of racism.

MW: By wise I mean politically, strategically effective for that moment. Obviously, in the long run it was not only wise but moral.

Sennett: It was effective because it succeeded. The walkout, which just took a few days, may have hindered production due to lost time for that short period. But it was more than made up by the addition of more workers and the heightened morale in the entire plant as a result of that victory. I can say that it was well worth the investment if that's the investment that had to be made.

MW: Did Gleaves become a sympathizer of the party?

Sennett: Surprisingly, quite the contrary! But I learned that later. He turned out to be an anti-Communist from the past and an ornery human being. Most blacks in the plant supported the progressive slate, but Maxwell Gleaves was not one of them. We even knew that before we took up his case. But we took up his case despite the fact that politically he was on the other side of the fence from us.

MW: Because he was the only one who had the qualifications for the job?

Sennett: That is correct.

MW: After that, was there general acceptance of him?

Sennett: As time went on, some of the very same toolmakers who had protested against this change in the toolroom were helpful to Gleaves. They helped him improve his skill and his knowledge of the work to be done in that department.

MW: That is an interesting story.

VI World War II Service

[Interview 6: September 29, 1981]##

SEEKING OUT THE ARMY

MW: Tell us something about your getting into the armed services.

Sennett: I was anxious to get into the service despite the fact that I was married, had a child, and worked in a defense plant. Having registered for the draft as required, I was deferred because of my status. However, I asked the draft board to revoke my deferral and to clear my induction into the armed forces. I was inducted on February 18, 1943, and assigned to the army air force base at Keesler Field in Biloxi, Mississippi, for six weeks of basic training.

MW: Why did you want to get into the service?

Sennett: I felt that my previous experience in Spain would be of some value to the armed forces. And I was personally anxious to be more directly involved in the war against fascism.

MW: Was this a view that was shared by other people in the party at that time?

Sennett: Yes, there were quite a number of people in the party who volunteered--who didn't wait for their draft status to change--and went into the service. This was also true of the veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

MW: But there wasn't any party pressure for you to do this?

Sennett: None at all.

MW: It was just at your own initiative?

Sennett: That's right. I discussed this with my wife, and she supported me in that decision. After I had completed my basic training, I was scheduled to enter a training school for radio operators. Since I had qualified for the school, I assumed I would automatically enter radio operator training once my basic training was over.

MW: How was it that you were assigned to be a radio operator?

Sennett: It was purely accidental. There happened to be a need for a large number of radio operators when I got to Keesler Field, and after various tests I was selected for that training.

MW: So neither the air force nor the radio operating was your idea; was it just the way it worked out as a result of your performance in these tests?

Sennett: Yes. I wasn't in a position to make any particular requests at the time. The men in my squadron all were assigned to various technical schools. There were schools on the base, for example, for radio operator mechanics and for aviation mechanics. It was one of the larger schools for technical training in the air corps.

POLITICS UNDER INVESTIGATION

Sennett: When basic training was completed, all of the men in my squadron with the exception of myself were sent to their respective schools, as previously designated. I was the only one who was kept behind. Obviously, I was disappointed and curious. I talked to the commanding officer, who said he was as puzzled as I as to why my transfer did not come through. However, having since then seen copies of files which the FBI and military intelligence compiled about me, I discovered the military intelligence on the field had communicated the information to my commanding officer. He didn't know the exact circumstances, but he knew that I was under investigation.

MW: Communicated what information, just information that you were under investigation?

Sennett: Yes, I was under investigation and therefore would not be sent to a training school until further notice. The copy of information in my file showed that Keesler Field's G-2 officer (military intelligence) was trying to determine my connections with the Communist party.

MW: What made them suspect that you had any connections anyway?



Bill Sennett and Jim Vopat, Keesler Field, Mississippi, 1943



Sennett: They obviously must have been informed by the FBI. After all, I was an open, known Communist and I was now in the air force. So the formality of trying to establish whether I was a Communist was really academic. I didn't understand why they had to dictate a memo which said that they were trying to make a determination which was still open, but that's what it said.

MW: Did they interview you at that time?

Sennett: No, I was not interviewed at that stage until I pursued the matter at a later date.

MW: Did anybody in the military ever ask you why you were a Communist?

Sennett: No, not when I first got into the air corps. This came up at a later discussion on my initiative.

MW: After this Keesler Field period?

Sennett: No, during the Keesler Field period. Meanwhile, a new group for basic training was being assembled in my squadron, and I was asked by the commanding officer to participate in the basic training program with the new group. I had already completed six weeks of basic training, and the commanding officer asked me to assist the staff sergeant on the drill field.

MW: You didn't at this time have any notion of why you were being retained there?

Sennett: Oh, I had an idea that it had something to do with my past and I didn't press the point because, after all, I volunteered to get into the service and I didn't want to raise a ruckus. I decided I'd go through this next period of military training again and see what happened.

MW: So you were, in effect, repeating basic training, but as a kind of supervisor?

Sennett: That is correct. After I completed the second period of basic training (my transfer to radio operator's school had still not yet come through), I made the obvious conclusion--that military intelligence was directly involved. I decided to confront military intelligence in the matter and I was given permission to see them by my commanding officer. Two officers from G-2 interviewed me and denied that they knew of any reason why I would be kept from going into radio operator mechanics school. The question of whether I was a Communist did come up in that discussion.

MW: They raised it?

Sennett: They raised that question. My FBI file states that I denied that I was a Communist. I was surprised to see that statement.

MW: Why does that surprise you?

Sennett: It's just that I don't recall denying it.

MW: You obviously were under the impression that you hadn't denied it, that you would have answered affirmatively had someone asked you. Now you discover that perhaps you didn't.

Sennett: It's only because I currently don't deny that I have been a Communist and I had been openly a Communist prior to my work for Studebaker.

MW: But at Studebaker you had been denying for job reasons that you were a Communist?

Sennett: That is correct. It is conceivable I denied it, because the memo that was in my files about that interview with those two officers on Keesler Field specifically stated that I denied it. However, we did get into a discussion about the nature of the war and, as a result of that discussion, the two officers in question were convinced that even if I were really a Communist I was not a menace to the army; in fact, that I could be helpful and an asset to the army air force.

MW: Did their memo indicate whether they believed that you were or were not? They just really didn't know?

Sennett: They said they weren't sure.

TEACHING RECRUITS IN THE SPECIAL TRAINING UNIT

Sennett: But they kind of sidestepped the question because they dealt with the fact that they believed that I would be loyal to my country and they didn't indicate that they believed that Communists were not loyal. They dealt with me as an individual, as a person.

As a result, the senior officer then suggested a program on the field that I could enter. One of them said that he had a friend who was in charge of the program. The memo stated that they suggested to me that I enter the program, but my recollection is pretty clear-cut on the fact that they did not want to indicate that they could do anything about getting me an assignment. They said that that was not their job, that was not up to them, but

Sennett: they certainly did make that decision according to the information that I discovered later.

MW: They were recommending in effect that you apply for this kind of an assignment?

Sennett: That I apply for an assignment teaching semiliterates and some illiterates the basics--reading, writing and arithmetic--in a new program which was going to be set up on the field called the Special Training Unit. In my files was a memo to their superior officers saying that this would give the G-2 the opportunity to keep in contact with what I was doing through that kind of program. It was visible. The material I would be teaching was something that I could do and at the same time, they would be able to determine whether the charge that I was a Communist was borne out by my work and behavior.

MW: A good place to keep an eye on you?

Sennett: That's right. I accepted the offer, as it seemed obvious that I would be kept at Keesler Field for some time, one way or another, and I had been working in the training groups' orderly room, which is like the office headquarters for the staff. I welcomed the opportunity to get away from temporary assignments with the basic training unit and into a teaching program as my first full-fledged assignment.

MW: To your knowledge now, was there a policy during that period about dealing with known Communists who were in the army? Would they be discharged? Would they be assigned to harmless tasks? Are you aware of any policy that existed?

Sennett: Yes, it's obvious from the Freedom of Information Act files that there was a policy to restrict the movements, where possible, of those who were known Communists. On the other hand, it was interpreted differently by various commands. I know from friends of mine who were Communists that some were put into labor battalions and that those labor battalions had suspected Nazi-Fascist sympathizers in their ranks as well. In other places, suspected Communists were able to get through officer training school even though there was supposed to be a hold on that. So apparently it depended upon the branch of the service and the particular command in whatever part of the country or overseas that you happened to be.

MW: So you applied for a teaching role in the special training unit and were accepted?

Sennett: Yes. As soon as I told the two military intelligence officers that I would accept, my orders came through within one week and I

Sennett: was transferred into that program. The special training unit was organized into squadrons and flights to conform with the fact that we were in the air corps. Military instruction was to be given to the squadrons as well as educational instruction. I started off teaching generally eighteen- or nineteen-year old white Southerners. There were no blacks in that program because of the army's segregation practices in the South.

The young men appeared to be mostly native-born Southerners who either were backward in grammar school or who escaped grammar school altogether, or at least went no further. Most seemed to be from the farm.

The idea of the school was to enable the men to pass tests which would prove they had the equivalent of a fifth grade education. If they did not pass those tests after going through the school program, they could be discharged from the service, and there was a special board set up, known as the Section 8 Board, which made that determination.

MW: My recollection of Section 8 was that it had something to do with mental illness, as well, or was it a blanket--

Sennett: It must have been so because men were discharged for that reason; but it seemed to have established some standards for education as well. If those standards were not met, then inductees could receive discharge from the service. I frankly protested to the people on the Section 8 Board for giving such discharges based on fifth grade equivalency tests. I contended that healthy young men could do all kinds of work in the armed forces and that even illiterates could do as well or better than those with higher education.

MW: It is curious that they were in the air corps. I would expect that they would have been assigned to the infantry or some other construction battalions. Wasn't the air corps kind of an elite corps of the army? That is, the high-scoring general aptitude test people.

Sennett: Not necessarily. The air corps had a need for more educated personnel to be trained as pilots and navigators, but there were many kinds of ground support groups needed. And they could score lower on general aptitude testing. I'm not sure whether the men in the special training unit were selected by testing first or whether they were washouts from other branches of service. It may have been a little of both. There were many men from other services who passed through Keesler Field and were reprocessed for other assignments in the air corps or into different branches of the service.

MW: I can't help but remark upon the curiosity of a suspected Communist being put in charge of teaching a group of sort of lumpen proletariat. Doesn't that strike you as curious, too?

Sennett: I think they pretty well knew that I was going to be teaching basics and that I could be helpful in that field. As a result of my work, I was promoted and became a supervisor of ten classes. Then I began to develop lesson plans to go along with the manuals and texts that were provided. The standard text was "Private Pete"--Private Pete does this, Private Pete does that. Private Pete dealt with arithmetic, spelling, grammar, and general service in the army. The idea was to relate reading, writing, arithmetic, and spelling to the condition of living and working in the army.

MW: This was an army-produced reading textbook?

Sennett: That is correct, for those grade levels. When I began to work on lesson plans, I would then also introduce some discussion about the war and what was going on. The men in my class did have the opportunity at least to discuss some aspects of the politics of the war.

MW: Did you use any Communist materials?

Sennett: No, I did not. I organized discussion starting with our country's reasons for the war against fascism. I pointed out that there were differing systems of society involved in a common struggle for a common goal.

MW: But in effect, the Communist line and the American official government line were the same on those issues at that time.

Sennett: Pretty much, yes. I felt that I should dwell on what we had in common. There were approximately twenty to a class at the school and ten classes to a flight. I would work with the instructors of those classes but would handle the entire flight in physical education exercises. After about six months, the special training unit was disbanded. There were no new illiterates or semi-literates being sent to our field. I'm not exactly sure why. It was a good program, though limited in time. But it was only intended as a short course and not a substitute for a fuller education.

MW: Did you feel that you were pretty successful as a teacher with these people? Did you have any indication of how they did after they went through your school?

Sennett: I have no idea what happened to my students after they left the school. Most of them still stayed in the service. Most of them did "graduate" and received the equivalent of a fifth grade

Sennett: education. To that extent, I was happy with what I did. After all, men who didn't want to continue in the service also had the opportunity of goofing off and failing in their tests so they could get out of the service. That's what I protested.

After the special training unit was disbanded, I had no assignment and almost automatically I was transferred to the rifle range, supposedly to teach men how to use the weapons. I had no special training in weaponry except for the old kinds of rifles that I had used in Spain and then, of course, I had gone through the rifle range myself. But I was no expert on record. I was a sharpshooter, but that was almost routine.

MW: As far as you know, the military at Keesler Field was not aware of your Spanish experience?

Sennett: They were aware of my Spanish experience because when I got to the field, after I had gone through my first training period, I was interviewed by the camp newspaper. They printed the interview along with my picture when I was still in basic training. In fact, I got a number of calls from people who wanted to talk to me about my experiences in Spain. So the matter was pretty public.

MW: This was before you were retained in your class?

Sennett: That is correct.

MW: So that could have triggered the whole business of your being held over, couldn't it?

Sennett: It appears from the files that I read that G-2 at Keesler Field received information from the army command headquarters in the Chicago area.

MW: But isn't any G-2 worth his salt going to read the camp newspaper and see that there is some guy who has been fighting in Spain? That is automatically going to raise a red flag, isn't it, in their minds, and they are going to wonder, who is this guy?

Sennett: Surely. But the military intelligence files make it clear that they also were alerted through channels by the army command in Chicago.

MW: How did the camp newspaper get the idea to interview you in the first place?

Sennett: I had listed my Spanish experience on a questionnaire which asked about any other military service.

MW: The questionnaire you filled out?

Sennett: Yes. Apparently, the camp newspaper looked for people with unusual experiences or that would be of special interest, because I was approached on that basis. I was also contacted, while in Keesler Field, by a special agent of the FBI who was fishing for information in the course of a stupid interview supposedly to get information about Spain. He asked me how deep were Spanish waters around certain ports and about areas of geography that he could have gotten out of a world atlas.

MW: This interview with the FBI agent was primarily directed in your opinion to finding out about you, not simply gathering intelligence that might be useful in the European theater for military purposes?

Sennett: It was elementary stuff and I couldn't contribute anything of any value along that line. I was unhappy with my rifle range assignment and I didn't want to remain as "permanent party" at Keesler Field with that kind of routine. It was at the time that I filed a request to be transferred into the infantry so that I might be shipped overseas and into action.

TEACHING WAR ORIENTATION--"WHY WE FIGHT"

Sennett: Shortly thereafter I learned about a new program which had begun on the field. This was a special services program called Information and Education. The sub-title of that particular program was "Why We Fight." I met an officer who was assigned to organize that program. His name was Gerald Schaflander. He struck me as being a very liberal officer, somewhat to the left I thought. As I got to know him better, I discovered he was a rather extreme leftist; that is, he was rigid and uncompromising in his views, confrontational and sectarian. I thought I was a little more circumspect than he and yet I learned later that he never was a Communist.

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MW: And you subsequently learned that he was not a Communist?

Sennett: I learned he wasn't. I recall that he entered the service by applying for officer's training school at the outset. He became a second lieutenant and was promoted to first lieutenant on the basis of a technical assignment and managed to get transferred to special services. He was then assigned to the program at Keesler Field. I became very interested in the possibilities of the program because the War Orientation Center was opened by

Sennett: Schaflander, and orders had been sent to the field to begin structuring a compulsory one-hour-a-week program for all enlisted personnel and officers. I thought that was right up my alley. Schaflander agreed but he was not able to get me transferred into the program. I decided to call on my two "friends" in military intelligence again.

I persuaded the two officers there that I had a good grounding in that kind of work, they commended me for my work in the special training unit, and they said they would see what they could do. I suggested to them that if they still had some reservations about my radical background my talks, writing, and other work in orientation could be an open book. They could see and know everything that I said and did. They laughed about that suggestion and, sure enough, my transfer came through and I was made a member of the staff handling the Information and Education program for Keesler Field.

There were no ratings in that [special services] program. I was a private and that would be it. If I had gone to a technical training school at the onset of that program in the technical training school for which I had qualified, I would have been given a PFC rating. If I had got through with the technical training school, I would have come out with a corporal's rating because those ratings were clearly established through the table of organization. But there was no table of organization in special services, particularly in this new program. I was told that I could get a sergeant rating if I were to go to work with one of the training squadrons. I rejected that.

MW: Do you mean in effect carrying on two jobs at the same time?

Sennett: No, that was an alternative assignment proposed to me by an officer in the classification administration. He said that some permanent party drill sergeants were needed in the training squadrons. That question came up for discussion.

MW: Did you really have this option of transferring into a regular--

Sennett: I could have, yes. An officer in charge of one of the special training units had asked me to consider it and asked me to talk to the base administration office.

MW: But military intelligence would have let you do that? I thought they wanted to keep you where they could keep their eye on you.

Sennett: Obviously it would have had to be cleared through them but I didn't pursue it any further. I wanted the Information and Education assignment. In any case, the people who came into the Information and Education [program] who had stripes, who were

WHY WE FIGHTDEMOCRACY VS. FASCISM *

(Session 1)

Introduction:

A. This is a war of the Democracies against the Fascist Nations.

B. Democracy is not a general term - it is a way of life. Fascism seeks to crush that way of life in Europe, the Orient, in the Western Hemisphere - in fact the world over.

C. Fascism would substitute for England's Magna Carta, France's Declaration of Human Rights, The Soviet Union's Self Determination of Nations, and our own Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights, a system of ruthless dictatorship and the subjugation of all nations.

I. What Is Fascism?

A. Fascism is ruthless 20th. century dictatorship. It is power in the hands of empire and financial interests merged with a brutal military machine. Fascism by its very nature means war. It is war against the people at home leading to war against the peoples of other nations.

(1)- Fascism makes a virtue of intolerance. Group is set against group and freedom of religious worship becomes a thing of the past.

(2)- Only "organizations of the State" are permitted to exist. Independent fraternal, sport, social or trade union associations are smashed.

(3)- Myth of racial superiority. "Master Race" persecutes Jews and other "inferior" peoples.

(4)- Use extreme nationalism to arouse people at home against "inferior nations" and the "plutocratic Democracies".

B. Fascism came to power against wishes of people.

(1)- Germany

Hitler made Chancellor in 1933 after election defeat in 1932. Majority of Germans were anti-Hitler, Anti-fascist, but disunited in face of fascism.

(2)- Italy

Mussolini led blackshirt march on Rome in Oct. 1922. Power was handed over to fascism while Italian peoples were disunited though opposed to it.

(3)- Japan

Militarists took over the reins of government through a coup, killing off opposition of democratic liberal minded Japanese leaders. People not united against fascism.

II. The Meaning of Democracy.

A. Democracy is a political and social order of "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." (Lincoln)

(1)- In a Democracy peoples rights are a virtue. As Declaration of Independence says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."

(2)- Freedom of speech and freedom of religious worship are realized under Democracy.

(3)- People can organize and join clubs, fraternal organizations, social groups and trade unions of their own choosing.

B. Democracy is a growing dynamic force.

(1)- Democracy is never perfect. It is always living and growing and being improved upon.

(2)- Democracy is a constant evolution developing into new and higher stages.

III. Democracy Cannot Live In The Same World With Fascism.

A. The clash between Democracy and Fascism is inevitable. Fascism, by its very nature aggressive, seeks to destroy democracy.

B. There can be no peace anywhere in the world so long as Fascism exists.

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PREPARED BY THE KEESLER FIELD WAR ORIENTATION DEPARTMENT

* Prepared by William Sennett for Keesler Field Information and Education discussion leaders for use in compulsory weekly squadron sessions.

Sennett: noncoms or who were officers, retained whatever rank they had. I retained my rank, which was that of private, and I remained a private, by the way, through my entire army experience. I think I am one of the very few people who didn't even come out with a PFC rating [laughs] at that time.

I was given more and more administrative, supervisorial, and programmatic responsibilities in the information and education program. Everyone else in our program who was attached to it had a rating, so I was outranked. But I was put in charge of the entire staff, including the sergeant who was working in the program because it was obvious that I had a better background than those people who were simply transferred into the program with their rank.

Our program consisted--among the many programs--of leading compulsory one-hour discussions for all squadrons, schools, and formations every week. Additionally, the War Orientation Center, which had large wall maps of all war fronts, was used for voluntary education. It had pamphlets and books. There were reading rooms. The war map was updated daily. We had a full-time commercial artist who did all our art work on the daily global news digest and on the war maps. We were to "impress" into our service any talented person we could locate who was not on permanent assignment elsewhere. As this was a field which was mainly a training base, there were soldiers coming and going and continual changes but we picked up a number of people who were happy to work with us and also benefitted because we got them off of KP.

MW: Bill, it sounds as if this position was one in which a political agitator would have enormous opportunities; that is, it is kind of an information dissemination center. You have a large flow of personnel. You have access to all of the personnel on the base, in fact. So someone who has some opportunity to control the curriculum and content of these presentations has an enormous opportunity to have influence on a lot of people, wouldn't you say?

Sennett: Yes, I think the program was very helpful in that respect. After all, there were between forty and sixty thousand men on the field during the period that I was there. We organized separate programs for officers. There was an officer in charge of our program, who started with the program. Lt. Schaflander was a very inflexible and opinionated man. He caused some needless controversy. But Schaflander was transferred out of the program after about three months and I have a hunch that some more conservative officers with whom he dealt saw to that.

Sennett: I was a Communist and I was kept in that program for a much longer period than Schaflander, the non-Communist.

When the new officer came in, a Lieutenant Howard Patton, he had no background for our kind of program. Patton was simply transferred in because he was an available officer and had been part of special services handling a recreation program. He was a very nice guy, and he recognized his inexperience. He chose me, for all practical purposes, to coordinate the war orientation program and I worked very closely with him to involve him at every level that I possibly could.

One of the experiences in expanding our program I recall was that Patton was directed to set up the first field-wide orientation program for all officers on the field, to summarize the subject: why we fight. He brought about five hundred officers together. But he had stage fright. He told me he couldn't do too well. So I said, "Look, we've got outlines. You can summarize that "material." But he said he was afraid that when questions would be asked, he wouldn't be able to handle them too well.

Patton suggested that he would be the moderator and he introduced me to the officers as the field's political specialist. He would recognize officers in the audience who wanted to ask questions directly in accordance with military protocol. He then referred the questions to me.

It was a good session; there were lots of questions, and even a lively discussion. After that session we decided to recruit officers from the ranks to lead subsequent discussions and we trained them as we did enlisted men to lead discussions on the various topics summarized in our prepared outlines. We organized smaller groups for officers' discussions after the first general session.

MW: Now, these sessions addressed questions about the international political, military situation or what?

Sennett: It depends upon the session. We had, if I recall, worked out sixteen or seventeen outlines that we used as standards for the sessions. For example, there was a session on "What is Fascism?" There was a general session on our allies. Then we would have separate outlines on our allies--France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and so forth. One of our sessions was on the Bretton Woods Conference. We would try to simplify the economic decisions of that conference and its meaning in the postwar world to come.

Sennett: We were able to find people to do a lot of the research work on the outlines. My role was to edit them and to lead seminars with those who were to lecture to the groups who were organized for the one-hour discussion periods.

MW: In effect, you were offering a kind of course in international relations?

Sennett: We certainly provided an introduction to international relations.

MW: [There was] really wide-ranging subject matter and you could expect questions about anything in the world, almost, having to do with the war and the participants in the war and why they fought and the ideological issues and the whole comprehensive business.

Sennett: Well, I did a lot of reading and had a lot of help and I was very happy under those circumstances. I gained a lot of experience in conducting the classes and I learned, of course, that some instructors were duds, who were not able to command the attention of the people they were dealing with. We had to substitute, change, and find new people. We were always losing instructors and getting new instructors. As soon as we got some people who were good, they might be shipped out because the war orientation program was not a permanent job for them.

MW: I can't help but ask you, did you ever try to slip in any Marxism-Leninism into any of this curriculum or these presentations that you made?

Sennett: I think it was unavoidable. I didn't consider that I was "slipping" in Marxism-Leninism. I used material I thought was relevant to the subject matter. Of course, what I had learned about the theories of Marx and Lenin obviously had a bearing on what I wrote and what I said.

MW: Is it going too far to state that at Keesler Field, Mississippi, the man in charge of educating the American troops there was a Communist propagandist?

Sennett: Yes. A patriotic Communist propagandist.

MW: And was propagandizing the troops?

Sennett: I was propagandizing the troops, but the propaganda was in the main the propaganda that I saw as in the best interests of the United States.

- MW: You wouldn't go any further than that to say that you were trying to insert certain attitudes about capitalism in general, for example, that might subsequently be applied to the United States itself?
- Sennett: I did try to restrict that so that the common cause of the allies was uppermost in our discussions.
- MW: The analysis of the war was that it was no longer an imperialist war--it was a people's war--but still issues of imperialism came up, probably with reference to Britain and her colonies, our allies and their colonies. So you must have had the temptation to have some general discussions about capitalist countries.
- Sennett: I tried to keep that within bounds. I felt that it was not right and not fair for me to take advantage of my position. I wasn't only thinking about the fact that I was being monitored. I was actually thinking about how far I should go and under the circumstances, I did not develop a position that attempted to teach the men that there was a great difference between imperialist countries or that America was an imperialist country. This was not obviously in any of the outlines that were written and if questions came up for discussion, I would encourage the men to express their own opinions. I think that's where Schaflander got into trouble.
- MW: So in retrospect, one can say that these military intelligence officers that put you in that spot in effect served a national interest. Even if there had been a Joseph McCarthy who in subsequent months might have subpoenaed them and said, "How did it happen that you put a Communist in charge of educating the troops in Keesler Field?" the decision that they made to get you in that spot was basically a wise one for the war effort. It really didn't do any damage to the country relative to subverting American ideology or anything?
- Sennett: To the contrary. I think it helped some soldiers understand the war better, improve their morale, and instill in them a more positive attitude to their role as soldiers.
- We [also] conducted voluntary forums which were held once a week at our center. We used to have about three or four hundred men coming to the forums weekly. Because of the turnover of personnel this meant that many thousands of soldiers attended the program over a year's time.
- MW: In other words, they didn't have to come to these.

Sennett: Oh, no, this was voluntary. This was their spare time. The forums were held in the evening. The men could have gone to the movies, gotten passes to go to town, gone out looking for women, and so forth. The War Orientation Center and our forums were popular on the field.

EDUCATING THE TROOPS IN PRINT AND ON THE AIR

Sennett: The daily news digest which I edited was a terse report of how we and our allies were doing on all of the war fronts. It was a legal-sized sheet of paper printed on both sides. Sometimes we attached an additional page to expand on the summarized news. It was circulated to all of the troops on the field.

We started a weekly radio program which continued for a number of months. It originated in the Gulfport, Mississippi, radio station. It was called "GI Comment," and I was the program's moderator. We would deal with much the same subject matter concerning the war that we were discussing with the troops. Mostly our staff people were used as the GI's commenting in answer to questions posed by the moderator.

Special services, our "parent" organization, would call upon us to do some research or even write some speeches for officers or other personnel. I wrote the speech for the commanding officer of the field when an assembly was called on D-Day. We had suggested that the troops of the entire field be gathered for such an assembly to celebrate that great event. The commanding officer thought it was a good idea, and over twenty thousand troops were marched to an assembly point on the field to express their support for the opening of the second front in Europe.

MW: Let me interrupt, Bill. What are the dates we are talking about? When did you arrive at Keesler Field and how long did you stay there?

Sennett: I arrived at Keesler Field in February of 1943 and I got into the war orientation program probably in December of 1943 or January of 1944. I was in that program for eight months.

MW: So that would take you up to August or September of--

Sennett: --Of 1944.

TRANSFER FROM THE WAR ORIENTATION PROGRAM

MW: Then did you leave Keesler Field? I don't want to get ahead, but let's just get the Keesler Field dates down here.

Sennett: Yes, then I was transferred out of Keesler Field.

MW: In September of '44?

Sennett: I'm not sure whether it was September, but it was late in 1944. The army orientation program, "Why We Fight," was apparently resisted at Keesler Field by its ranking officers initially, and I learned that this program was begun elsewhere prior to January of 1944. I learned from army intelligence files that there was an ongoing discussion about the program, and its introduction was delayed.

Once the program got underway, it was cited by the field inspector of the fourth service command as the most effective in the entire command. The inspector recommended that other fields should study our program and use it as a model or as an example in structuring programs.

I indicated earlier that we were able to recruit researchers, writers, artists, and lecturers from among the enlisted men who came through Keesler Field. In fact, I met some of my old buddies who were temporarily based on the field whose experience we were able to use in research, lecturing, and writing.

MW: Old buddies from--

Sennett: --From the old left movement.

MW: In Chicago?

Sennett: In Chicago, in New York, and other parts of the country. A Spanish war vet, Harry Fisher, was at Keesler for a time, as was the folksinger Pete Seeger.

MW: During your period at Keesler Field, did you have any connections with the Communist party, any communication?

Sennett: Not organizationally, only through some letters to close friends and associates.

MW: You were just simply gone as far as the party was concerned?

C730

WAR ORIENTATION GLOBAL NEWS DIGEST

FOR VICTORY



Published Daily By The
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SPECIAL EDITION

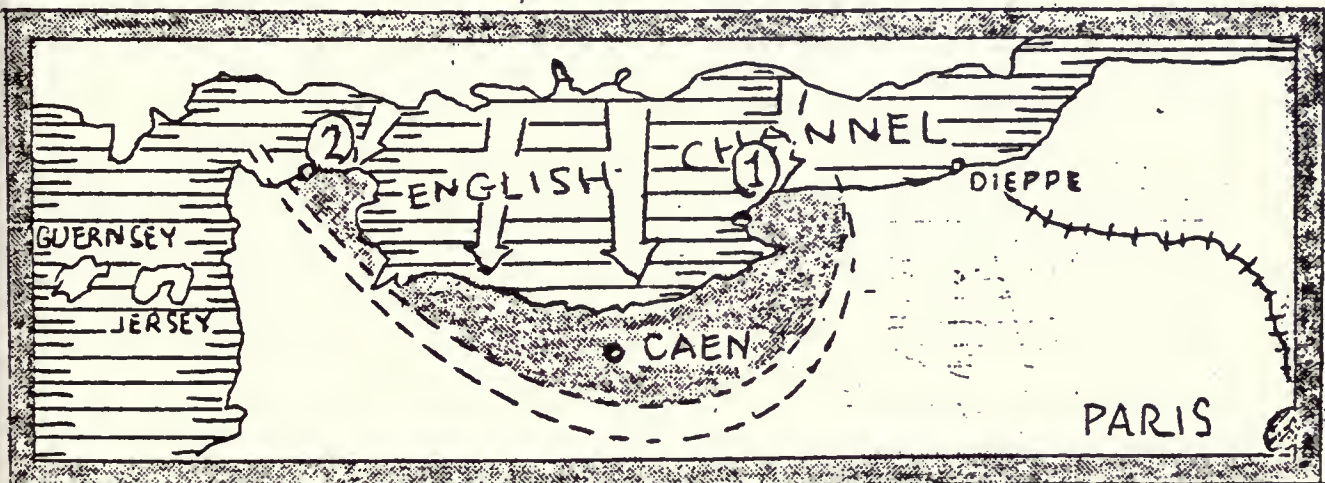
June 6, 1944 (A.M.)

No. 52



INVASION!!

The dramatic culmination of months of training, waiting and supply preparations was announced at 0232 this morning with General Dwight Eisenhower's terse communique stating that Allied forces had landed in France. The long awaited invasion of Hitler's European Fortress had begun.....Latest reports from the scene of this great new threat to Nazi Germany said that an estimated 20,000 airborne troops had been landed in north France. Beaches under assault by combined forces



found German defenses apparently crumbling in some sectors. A communique from the U.S. Air Force Photo Reconnaissance Base said that troops from Allied beachheads in north France were already slashing inland. Subsequent announcements by radio Berlin (not confirmed by O.W.I.) said that LeHarve (1) and Cherbourg (2) was the center of gravity of Allied troops. German radio announced further that four British paratroop divisions had landed near Caen between LeHarve and Cherbourg and that the apparent strategy was a drive east to cut off the Cherbourg peninsula. The Germans also maintained that Calais and Dunkerque were also under attack....Going on the air shortly after the first announcement of the invasion, Prime Minister Churchill said that masses of airborne troops had landed behind enemy lines in France. He also declared that beach landings involving 4000 ships and 11,000 planes was being found less difficult than expected. In climaxing his statement he added "everything is going according to plan....and what a plan!"....Referring to the many reports being sent out by the German radio, Elmer Davis, head of the Office of War Information, warned this morning against putting too much trust in Nazi reports. Though the Germans were apparently accurate in their initial invasion report, subsequent announcements may be made deliberately misleading....The news of the invasion was reported to the Russian people at 0645 which Moscow radio made the announcement. At 0710 this morning CBS announced that the Allies had landed along a 100 mile front, and that Airborne troops had landed behind enemy lines. (MORE NEWS IN SPECIAL 11.00 EDITION).

% D-DAY INVASION PRAYER!
 % COMPLETE INVASION ANALYSIS.
 % 1300 COMMANDO OUTDOOR THEATRE
 %

Sennett: The position of the Communist Party was that when you were in the service, you were not an active member; you were a member of the Communist party on leave. I had no personal contact with the Communist party except for the fact that when I would go home on furlough I would contact my friends who were members of the Communist party.

MW: Did you run into any persons at Keesler Field whom you knew to be or discovered to be Communists?

Sennett: Oh, yes, I did meet a number of people who were. Some I knew and others looked me up to say hello.

MW: There weren't any sort of secret identification signals or anything like that where Communists could get in touch with each other?

Sennett: None at all.

MW: Did you just happen to discover that people had similar backgrounds or similar attitudes toward political matters and then discovered that they were Communists?

Sennett: With some that was true. Our program was one to which Communists would naturally gravitate because Communists are politically minded. So I met and talked to a number of people who were Communists from different parts of the country, but there was never any meeting of any Communist organization on Keesler Field and there was never any Communist organization on Keesler Field and there was never any attempt to recruit people from the army into the Communist party.

MW: When you encountered people whom you discovered to be Communists, was there a kind of hush-hush approach to this or was it fairly open; that is, we're not sure whether you denied or acknowledged to military intelligence that you had been a Communist, so did you feel it necessary to deal sort of conspiratorially with anyone that you knew was a Communist in order not to let these other people know whom you were?

Sennett: Unless there was an occasion for making it known that one was a Communist, there was no necessity to do that.

MW: But did you feel a sense, on occasion, that you ought to keep it secret?

Sennett: I didn't make it public. I felt that in working with the people on the base, I was not going to identify myself as a Communist except with those who were somewhat Communist oriented themselves. Military intelligence had informants watching and reporting to

Sennett: them about my movements, contacts, and conversations but I was open about my views.

MW: But then there were some people there who, in fact, did know that you were a Communist?

Sennett: Yes, there were.

MW: Presumably, one would think that kind of word would get back to military intelligence one way or another.

Sennett: It undoubtedly did, but there was nothing that I said or did that was conspiratorial.

MW: So wouldn't one assume, knowing what we know now about how these things work, that intelligence people would assume that this kind of program would be a magnet for Communists and that it would be a good place to put some informers, just to keep track of what's going on?

##

Sennett: That was exactly what happened. My work in the army orientation program was abruptly terminated because I was suddenly informed that I was being transferred to the infantry. That was in December of 1944. This was based on an application that I had made over one year previously when the special training unit was being liquidated and before there was a war orientation program on base. My request to get into the infantry earlier came through at a very inopportune time a year later. I tried to stop the transfer. I wanted to stay with the program. Lieutenant Patton went to bat for me. He got the special service officer to write to Washington. That officer even requested the base commander to write to Washington where the orders were processed to stop the transfer but it was not to be. The wheels were already turning and I was transferred out.

I ended up in Camp Maxey, Texas, for another training program--thirteen weeks of infantry basic! I completed basic training and was then told that because of impaired vision on my left eye I was in limited service and could therefore not be sent overseas.

MW: That had been diagnosed previously?

Sennett: It had and the air corps had that fact noted on my service records. I had forgotten about the limited service designation until I was informed about it again at Camp Maxey. Obviously, there should have been a determination made before I went into basic and was transferred out but it was not done. As a result, I

Sennett: found myself on KP for several weeks straight because there was an attempt being made to determine what to do with me. Since I could not be sent into infantry service overseas I requested that I be sent back to Keesler Field, and was told that that was not possible.

MW: Are you sure that this was simply the inexorable wheels of bureaucracy and not that someone had decided, "Hey, we don't want a Communist running our I and E program at this base."

Sennett: I believe that is actually what happened. They found they could use the technicality of my earlier transfer to get me out of the orientation program.

MW: Your FBI file and your FOIA does not give any proof of this?

Sennett: It does not show that, but, as you know, the Freedom of Information Act material sent on request is selective. Not only is it heavily censored, but whole pages of files are held back. I was informed that about 500 pages were restricted and were not mailed to me on my request. I have not appealed that decision.

MW: What is your best guess right now about that?

Sennett: I am inclined to think that there was an upper echelon attempt to get me out of the program.

MW: Because you were a Communist?

Sennett: Because of the fact that I was a Communist; the program itself was very popular on the field and I was a key worker in its development.

MW: And it got a citation as the model for all other programs.

Sennett: Yes, it did.

MW: So what military officer was this? [laughs] All this to be run by a Communist!

Sennett: Meanwhile, back at Camp Maxey, it was decided to send me to a diesel mechanics school [laughs], something I didn't ask for. I was to be shipped to an air corps base near Spokane, Washington, known as Geiger Field. The training program for diesel mechanics was for six weeks to "graduation." In civilian life a four-year apprenticeship program was required to become a diesel mechanic. I completed that school--as you can see, I attended a lot of schools, classes, and training programs [laughs], despite my childhood disdain for a formal education. I was assigned to work under a sergeant who was a master mechanic. We were maintaining

Sennett: and repairing bulldozers on the field. Obviously, I was not a journeyman and I needed direction in my work as a diesel mechanic. Actually, I wasn't much more than a "grease monkey" and helper.

MW: Is this in any way responsible for the fact that you now drive a diesel Mercedes Benz?

Sennett: [laughs] No way! That's purely coincidental. Time moved on. The war was won in Europe and there was the "clean-up" job with Japan still to be completed. I was able to do some "volunteer" work with the information and education program at Geiger Field in addition to working on bulldozers.

DEPENDENCY DISCHARGE REUNITES THE FAMILY

Sennett: I decided to get out of the service by applying for a dependency discharge. I felt that I had compelling personal reasons that I wanted to be reunited with my wife and child. I figured it was time to go home.

MW: And the war was over.

Sennett: And the war was over, and I was not interested in becoming part of the army of occupation. I applied for a dependency discharge as a result of my daughter Barbara's illness. She had developed rheumatic fever and had been hospitalized for many months. This was the basis upon which the dependency discharge was granted in November of 1945.

MW: So all during this period you were always in the continental United States.

Sennett: Yes.

MW: You got a lot of schooling and did a lot of schooling and it was in a sense a kind of an educational period.

Sennett: It was an excellent education for me, especially in working with non-Communists, large groups of differing kinds of people, and being in a position to learn from them as well as to impart something to them in return.

MW: Did you talk about your Spanish war experience at all in lectures that you gave or materials that you put out?

Sennett: No, only occasionally.

MW: The only really public mention of that was that interview in the--

Sennett: --In the camp newspaper, and things were transient on the field-- almost a 50 percent turnover of people on the field every few months. Only permanent parties who got to know me, knew me as a guy who had been to Spain.

MW: Did you get to see much of Gussie during this period in the service or was there only one furlough?

Sennett: I had several furloughs due to my daughter's illness. She was hospitalized for six months in one stretch when she was only two years old.

MW: In Chicago?

Sennett: In Chicago.

MW: They didn't move down to be near you at the base?

Sennett: No.

MW: And Gussie continued to work?

Sennett: She continued to work in Chicago.

MW: And continued political activity?

Sennett: Yes, but to a lesser extent.

MW: Did she keep you informed about what was going on in political activity with letters and so forth?

Sennett: As much as she could.

MW: Did you ever wonder whether those letters might be intercepted?

Sennett: Oh, I know that the letters were intercepted by G-2. They steamed them open and read the letters, and re-sealed them. My FOIA file contains copies of letters to me.

MW: Is it possible that you inadvertently, through those letters and through other contacts that you may have made with Communists who got into the army, may have been an unwitting source of information about the Communist movement to the army intelligence and the FBI?

- Sennett: No, I don't believe so. I don't see anything of any consequence that they could have learned about the Communist movement that would have been of any value as a result of my letters to either my wife or my friends.
- MW: No, I mean her letters to you.
- Sennett: Her letters to me were in the main about local people that I knew, public information, and a lot of personal matters. Generally, she wrote on the assumption that my letters were being read.
- MW: So everybody was pretty discreet about it?
- Sennett: That's right. But there was nothing to hide.
- MW: So your presence there would not have led the authorities to Communists that they might not otherwise have known about simply because they would be attracted to you and you would know them and so forth?
- Sennett: No. I am sure that they concluded that from their observations.
- MW: I guess, had you been an important source of intelligence to them in that sense, they wouldn't have transferred you to the infantry.
- Sennett: Absolutely. They had plenty of informants. That was clear. The names of the informants were not identified for me from FOIA files but I recognized some of the people from the descriptions. There were people constantly being monitored as informants in the army as there had been in civilian life. I was constantly being spied upon.

POSTWAR VIEWS ON THE WORLD

- MW: To sum up your army experience, did it change your attitudes about anything as a result of this whole experience or did you come out of the war seeing the world pretty much the same way as you saw it when you went in?
- Sennett: I came out basically convinced, as I was before I entered, about the need for a socialist society--even more so. I was enthusiastic about the postwar prospects, but if anything I think it helped to improve my relationships with non-left people, my ability to get along with them and to understand their interests and motivations better. I had a better psychological view of people without reference to their politics.

MW: I remember you spoke earlier about your experience as a political commissar in Spain and how you came on a little strong and encountered some protest, but as a result of that experience learned a good deal about human relations. Was this sort of a graduate course in the same thing?

Sennett: It's an ongoing lesson if one listens and does more reflecting.

MW: You were at Keesler Field until August of 1944?

Sennett: I was at Keesler Field until December of 1944.

MW: It's kind of an interesting footnote and coincidence that I was also stationed at Keesler Field. I was there from--I'm trying to think of the dates now--from about January of '44 to around May of '44. I may have--

Sennett: If you were there in January, you could have received a copy of the daily news digest. You also had to sit through some compulsory sessions and, while you may not have run into me, if you were interested, you might have visited the War Orientation Center. [laughs]

MW: It's funny, I don't remember that. I remember the PX! I was a few years younger than you and my interests weren't terribly serious at that moment and I--

Sennett: You mean your interests weren't in foreign affairs?

MW: They weren't in foreign affairs.

Sennett: Then you may have been one (and there were many) who said, "I've got enough of that stuff in compulsory orientation!"

MW: The only thing that I remember about Keesler Field really strongly was that all the mess halls were in a row and there was one that was for the night shift. It would serve meals at just the opposite times, so in the evening there would be breakfast and in the morning there would be dinner and we somehow got, by mistake, assigned to that mess hall when we were working in the daytime. So we would go in for breakfast and get mashed potatoes and gravy and that's about all I remember! [laughs]

VII Launching the Chicago Star*

[Interview 7: October 29, 1981]##

MW: In this seventh session, we are going to talk about the period immediately following World War II. I guess the first question to ask you is what happened as soon as you got out of the army.

Sennett: I was released from the army in November, 1945, and I returned to Chicago for several weeks of rest and relaxation with my wife and my daughter Barbara. Shortly thereafter I reported to the Communist party office for re-integration into party life and for assignment. The Studebaker plant where I had been working prior to going into the service was being phased out. The local union where I had been active was also being dissolved. Gil Green, who was the Illinois district chairman and was a member of the leading body of the Communist party of the United States known as the National Board, suggested that I consider becoming the party organizer in Peoria, Illinois. This is the state's second largest city with a population of just over a hundred thousand and one industrial giant dominating the area--the Caterpillar Tractor Works with over 18,000 employees. Most of the plant's workers were already members of the left-wing-led Farm Equipment Workers Union. The Communist party had a very--

MW: You say "left-wing-led"--it wasn't Communist?

Sennett: No, most of the leadership was non-Communist. They were, in the main, left oriented. The Caterpillar plant was the largest local of the Farm Equipment Workers Union and the international

*Mr. Sennett has donated two volumes of the Chicago Star (beginning July 6, 1946), which are available on microfilm at the Newspaper Microcopy Room of the University of California's Doe Library.

Sennett: headquarters of that CIO union was based in Chicago. I wasn't smitten with the idea of moving to Peoria, and my wife was not happy with that proposal either. However, I agreed that I would step in temporarily until some other functionary could be assigned to that responsibility.

MW: Was it because you didn't want to leave Chicago or you didn't like the nature of the assignment?

Sennett: I didn't want to leave Chicago and I wasn't too excited about living in Peoria.

MW: Was there any aspect of it in particular that you didn't like? Was it a political reason?

Sennett: No, it was not a political reason. It was just that I had gotten out of the service and I was anxious to stay in Chicago. Moving out of town was not particularly appealing.

MW: It was sort of a salt mine kind of assignment?

Sennett: No, not from the party's point of view. While the CP membership was small, the city had a strong industrial and farm base. The political reasoning was sound. Outside of Chicago the Communist party was very small (Chicago obviously dominated Illinois as a whole) and in the second largest city, with a large industrial base, it would have been a real feather in the Communist party's cap if it could have built a significant Communist party organization. So from that point of view I could understand it, but I didn't see myself living in a smaller town to start with. I liked the large city and I prevailed upon the Communist party to consider that only as a temporary assignment.

I worked with the Communist party in Peoria as the acting section organizer. The area included some small towns nearby and lots of farm country. I was there for about three months while my family remained in Chicago. Of course, Peoria is not too far from Chicago and I therefore made frequent trips back and forth to be with my family.

MW: How big was your family at this point?

Sennett: There were three of us--my daughter Barbara, my wife, Gussie, and myself. My parents, brothers, and sister were living in Chicago then.

COMMUNIST PARTY RELATIONSHIP TO THE STAR

Sennett: Gil Green informed me that the party had decided to help launch a non-Communist weekly newspaper in Chicago that would have its own publishing association and would be backed by trade unions and other organizations sympathetic to the left.

MW: Now, did you say a non-Communist?

Sennett: A non-Communist paper, yes.

MW: Which means what? The Communist party is launching a non-Communist publication?

Sennett: The Communist party had proposed the concept to other left-led groups. The party participated in its launching through the instrumentality of a publishers' association composed of individuals who agreed on the need for such a left publication.

MW: Okay, but it was in fact a Communist publication simply disguised as a non-Communist--

Sennett: No, it really was not. Communist participation and support was open and the party played the leading role.

MW: It was a Communist party idea which it discussed with others? It said to those on the left--for example, from the left trade unions and certain left-wing organizations--we the Communist party propose that we get together, unofficially, with those of you who agree on the need for a left publication. We'll help to get the paper off the ground and we propose setting up a body, an association, an organization, that will direct that publication.

Sennett: But the aim was not to have control. The aim was broader support and an editorial policy acceptable to a non-party left.

MW: You mean, in practice the Communist party did have control, but the aim was not for control? The aim was to involve as many on the left, including non-Communists, to participate in the organizational decision making? There was an organization that was set up to make that happen?

Sennett: I think you've summed that up quite well. Gil suggested that I apply for the job as the publisher and manager of the paper. He felt that my organizational and political experience would stand me in good stead. While I had not had any direct experience with publications, he thought that my background and aptitude qualified me to take on that kind of responsibility. The particulars of business management and publishing were things I needed to learn.

MW: To whom would you apply for that job?

Sennett: I applied to the organization that was already set up in skeleton form called the People's Publishing Association. They already had a board of directors and they were looking for people to take on the editorial and business positions.

MW: Can you give me any more detail about how the People's Publishing Association was put together and who was on it?

Sennett: The People's Publishing Association was organized by a number of trade union leaders together with Fred Fine and Andy Newhoff of the Communist party and with other individuals who were part of other left-led organizations.

MW: So the Communist leaders took the initiative to get together with other trade union people?

Sennett: That's correct.

MW: And to say in effect we need a newspaper and they agreed on this?

Sennett: I don't know if the actual carrying out of the plan took quite that kind of turn. I wasn't around when those discussions were going on. I understand that there had been individual discussions which started with individual union leaders to consider the question of the advisability of such a newspaper.

MW: The publishers' association was in existence before you were approached with this idea?

Sennett: Yes, it was.

MW: I am trying to get at the mechanics of how a revolutionary party, such as the Communist party, works with other groups. I am curious about the details of how these other non-Communist groups would be approached, whether or not they would be concerned that the initiative was coming from the Communist party and so forth. How do you put this kind of thing together? This was a little early for the McCarthy period and the strong anti-Communist feelings, but certainly there was some of that present in the unions at that time and suspicion of Communists. It's an interesting phenomenon that you were able to put together a publishing association that was fairly broad based at this time.

Sennett: A significant minority of non-Communist trade unionists respected the Communist party. And of course there were Communists who were trade union leaders. They had been pioneers in building unions.

MW: Can you describe the composition of the board? I assume you don't remember who all the members of the association were.

Sennett: The three directors of the People's Publishing Association were Frank Marshall Davis, a black poet and writer who became the executive editor of the paper--

MW: Now, was he a Communist?

Sennett: He was not a Communist, not as far as I know. He was a sympathizer and he definitely was a left-wing person.

MW: Then who were the other two?

Sennett: The other two were Grant Oakes and Andy Newhoff. Oakes was the international president of the Farm Equipment Workers Union, CIO, which had over a hundred thousand members in the country.

MW: Was he a Communist?

Sennett: He was not a Communist.

MW: Then who was the third?

Sennett: The third person was Andy Newhoff, who had been working with the International Labor Defense, a civil rights organization. He was a member of the party. These three people were the ones to whom I applied and talked about--

MW: They were what, the executive committee of a larger board?

Sennett: They were the officers of the board. I don't remember how many members there were initially, but more people joined as the paper commenced publication. To become a member, a person could purchase a share. This was one of the ways in which they also raised most of the seed money to launch and support the paper.

MW: But this was not a corporation or--

Sennett: No, it was not. A corporation was formed later.

MW: So this organization was not really the owner of the paper.

Sennett: No, this was the volunteer body, the membership that made up, you might say, the "coalition" that took responsibility for launching the publication. At its height the People's Publishing Association had 1,400 members, and eventually that membership elected its board of directors and officers. The corporate structure was set up after I was hired and it was known as the Chicago Star Publishing Company, Incorporated. The paper was

Sennett: named the Chicago Star. The board of directors of that corporation chosen was Ernest de Maio, who was the district president of the CIO United Electrical Workers International Union--

MW: When you say chosen, do you mean chosen by the board of directors of the People's Publishing Association?

Sennett: That is correct. Frank Marshall Davis and I were the other two members. I had been hired to function as the publisher and general manager. Carl Hirsch, who had been a reporter and the Midwest editor of the Daily Worker, was brought on board as the managing editor.

MW: Now, which of these people were Communists?

Sennett: Those who were Communists were obviously myself and Carl Hirsch.

MW: De Maio wasn't?

Sennett: De Maio was also a Communist, but he was not a known Communist.

MW: Did you know he was a Communist?

Sennett: I knew he was a Communist.

MW: Would you categorize a person like that as an underground person?

Sennett: He couldn't be underground in the sense that he was a public figure in the International Union of Electrical Workers.

MW: [laughs] A closet Communist?

Sennett: He was what you might call a closet Communist.

MW: Which meant that the people in the [Union of] Electrical Workers probably didn't know he was a Communist.

Sennett: He was accused of being a Communist. He never denied that he was, but he also never stated that he was not. His attitude was to simply take that charge and not give any credence to it, but not to deny it. Frank Marshall Davis, while he was the executive editor, worked only part time. He had an outside income, and we would only pay his expenses. I don't believe he made very much money writing poetry, but he also wrote articles and commentary for a number of black publications. He felt that he could not afford to work for us full time. We felt that it was important to have someone with his talent and prestige in the black community working for us.

Sennett: Carl Hirsch was the consummate editorial staff person. He combined the skills of an editor, manager, editorial writer, correspondent, planner, and layout specialist. And, in those days, working with linotype machines in the print shop, Carl would supervise the closing of the paper's pages every week. He was (and is today) a self-effacing, dedicated, and concerned human being. With our slim resources and a skeleton staff we were fortunate in having Carl Hirsch--the most talented all-around, productive newspaper man I have ever met.

After leaving the Communist party in 1957, Carl became a writer of a number of children's science books for which he received several awards in the process. He currently is a writer-in-residence for children in public and private schools.

Dick Durham was a black writer who had written for the Chicago Defender. He joined our editorial staff at the paper's inception. Dick eventually became the editor of the black Muslim newspaper, Muhammad Speaks, in the seventies. He also was the actual writer of Muhammad Ali's book called The Greatest.

MW: Was he a Communist?

Sennett: Durham was a Communist. His brother Earl was the secretary of the Labor Youth League, the successor to the Young Communist League. Len Lewin was the son of a coffee mogul based in Indianapolis and for a time went back to work in his father's business. He was our first labor editor. Ted Cox, who replaced Len Lewin, was formerly an editor of a CIO publication in Cleveland. In 1947, we had a husband-wife team join our staff, Bill Carr, who had a job at the Chicago Sun. That paper was later merged with the Chicago Times and became known as the Sun-Times. He liked the idea of our paper so much that he quit his job as reporter to come work for us full time at a very meager salary compared with what he was getting at the Sun. His wife, Mickie, also joined Bill. She, too, was a very good professional writer and had been working for the Hearst press in Chicago.

Howard Fast was our regular columnist from day one of the issuance of the publication. He was then and still is known as one of the country's best selling authors of historical novels.

MW: He was a Communist at that time, too, wasn't he?

Sennett: He was a Communist then, yes.

MW: He didn't leave the party until after--

Sennett: He left the party about the same time that I did in '57 or '58.

MW: Now, I didn't ask you about each one of those individuals, but roughly how many of them were actually Communists?

Sennett: Bill Carr and Mickie Carr were not. I am not certain about Len Lewin.

MW: Now, when people were brought on the paper, would you look into that? Would you want to know whether they were Communists or not?

Sennett: When people were brought on the paper--For example, we hired Bill and Mickie Carr and we knew they were not Communists. We welcomed that. Whether they were or were not Communists was not the deciding issue about whether they could or should work on the paper. It was whether they had the kind of political know-how that we needed and the talent that was necessary.

ORGANIZATION OF THE NEWSPAPER

Sennett: My job was to manage all of the business aspects of the paper, to coordinate the raising of funds, to build our support group--that is, to increase the membership of the People's Publishing Association. But most important, from the point of view of circulation building, I would work with our circulation manager to build Chicago Star support committees in local unions and in other organizations. We did not do direct mail in those days. Our subscriptions were secured by our supporters directly.

MW: What was your title?

Sennett: My title was general manager.

MW: You were the boss of the paper really?

Sennett: I was responsible for the paper.

MW: To the corporation?

Sennett: To the corporation and politically to the Communist party.

MW: Now, did you report to the Communist party through the corporation or directly to the Communist party?

Sennett: My job and my politics were linked. As a member of the state committee I worked within the party to develop greater support for the Chicago Star.

- MW: Suppose a policy question came up that you were doubtful about? Who would you clear it with?
- Sennett: Carl Hirsch and I would discuss it with the staff. We would also exchange opinions with Gil Green and Fred Fine, the two leading Communists in Illinois. Fred also wrote a column for the Star under a pseudonym.
- MW: Can you give us the pseudonym?
- Sennett: His pseudonym was "Pop" Dearborn.
- MW: Were Green and Fine in any sense superior to you in the Communist party?
- Sennett: Yes, they were.
- MW: What were their positions at that time?
- Sennett: Gil Green was a member of the national board and Illinois district president. Fred Fine was a member of the national committee and the CP's Illinois labor secretary.
- MW: Now, writing that Pop Dearborn column, did that mean Fred Fine was around the office all of the time or was he doing other work and would submit his copy?
- Sennett: Fred's main job as labor secretary took up most of his time. The column was just an additional chore.
- MW: What I am trying to get at, I guess, is who was your immediate superior with whom you would clear something.
- Sennett: It would be either Fred Fine or Gil Green.
- MW: So it was kind of a two-headed organization.
- Sennett: No, it was just that Fred and Gil were more directly involved in dealing with matters that came up on the paper. Carl Hirsch, who was the actual editor, was responsible for the weekly content of the paper. He would be the final decision maker before all the pages were closed.
- MW: I don't get a sense of strong hierarchy here. It seems a little informal the way you describe it.
- Sennett: It had to be informal, because it was not the Communist party's paper alone. We had a responsibility to the People's Publishing Association and the staff itself and, as the occasion may have demanded, we consulted with de Maio, Oakes, Davis, and others.

MW: Now, if I am bringing this up too soon to upset the narrative flow here, we can save it until later, but I am interested to know whether there were ever controversies in which the line of the Communist party might be in conflict with the attitudes of some of the other people in the People's Publishing Association or where you might have a controversy over the line that the newspaper ought to take on a given issue.

Sennett: Yes, it is a little too soon, but there was only one controversy that I can recall and that was primarily based upon some disagreement--and I don't remember exactly on what the issue or issues were--by the two people, Bill Carr and Mickie Carr, who were not Communists. But that came later on because they did not start with the paper. They came on only after about a year of the paper's existence.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Sennett: We signed up some fourteen hundred members in the People's Publishing Association and we secured over nine thousand subscriptions to the paper before the first issue was printed. In addition, we secured orders for twelve thousand bulk copies over and above the subscriptions. These were to be sold by the various organizations supporting the Chicago Star. We had organizational support from CIO unions like the Farm Equipment Workers Union, the United Auto Workers, the United Packinghouse Workers, the Shoe Workers, the Fur and Leather Workers, the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Union, the Food and Tobacco Workers, some local AFL unions, etc. In the main, they were local unions who gave us this support. There were only a few internationals or district councils, like the Packinghouse Workers District Council, who supported our paper. But in addition to that we had to get the individual support of the individual local unions.

MW: What did support mean? Did they give you financial contributions or buy bulk orders or encourage their members to subscribe or what?

Sennett: Yes, some local unions did give us financial contributions. In addition to that, they endorsed the concept of a paper like the Chicago Star and recommended to their local unions and the membership that they should subscribe and help get additional readership.

MW: Getting this started must have required a certain initial amount of capital.

Sennett: Yes, the start-up money raised was about \$40,000. In today's terms that would be much higher. So it was not an inconsequential amount. After all, the subscriptions sold for only \$2.50 a year.

MW: For a weekly?

Sennett: For a weekly, for fifty-two issues. The money was raised by getting this organizational support, getting individuals to join the People's Publishing Association. We calculated that we at least had enough money to keep the paper going for a year, based on our subscription and limited advertising revenues.

MW: Was the Communist party the biggest contributor?

Sennett: No, it was not. Actually, most of the money came [from] outside of the Communist party. Various Communist party clubs raised money and even took on voluntarily quotas for the amount of money that they would help to raise in the future.

MW: Were there any fat cats or was it all small contributions?

Sennett: In the main, it was small contributions. There were several people who made some large sum contributions of two hundred fifty or five hundred dollars. I don't remember a single thousand-dollar contribution.

MW: Did you have to buy a press with this and a building?

Sennett: No, we farmed out the presswork. We opened up our own offices and we did the printing at a left-wing printer, which was also the printer of a Croatian paper. This printer was called Praga Press and they did the typesetting as well as the presswork.

MW: What was the format? Was this a full-sized newspaper or tabloid?

Sennett: It was a tabloid. It was a sixteen-page tabloid except for special enlarged issues.

MW: And you took advertising?

Sennett: We took advertising and promoted the paper through its supporters.

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MW: You were talking about [special kinds of] promotion.

Sennett: Oh, yes, unlike the mail promotions that magazines and other publications undertake these days to build their circulation, the Chicago Star relied on its organizational support to get

Sennett: subscriptions and to get what we call bundle orders of the paper in order to promote single issue sales. We set up Star committees in local unions and in district councils of those unions. Wherever we could get volunteer Star promotional directors, we did that as well, and we involved hundreds of individuals in the circulation process. I was very busy because, even though we had a circulation director working on the paper, there were so many places to go and so many organizations to cover and so many meetings to attend that we were working day and night in order to touch base with our supporters. It was quite a hectic time and I was fully involved. But one of the things that I liked about this job was that I got to know a wider spectrum of the labor movement in the Chicago area by meeting with at least the left-wing heads of various local unions and councils of labor.

I was able to work directly with those unions, with many union members, and with other supporting organizations to involve them in circulation building. We had subscription campaigns and gave out all kinds of prizes, including a trip to Europe. The European trip was won by Sam Parks, the head of the Wilson local of the Packinghouse Workers union. His local secured about five hundred subscriptions to the Star in that circulation campaign. Charles Hayes, later the district director of the packinghouse union, was the Star director in the local. He was elected to Congress in 1983.

EDITORIAL POLICY AND CONTROL

Sennett: The issues and editorial coverage of the paper were highlighted by the postwar period. The very first issue of the Star, for example, dealt with the problems resulting from the changeover from a wartime to a peacetime economy. The lead story in volume one, number one, was on the congressional gutting of the Office of Price Administration. Subsequent issues of the paper dealt with some of the same issues that we Americans are dealing with these days--inflation, unemployment, rent control, housing, and so forth. The Chicago Star dealt with the growing wave of strikes that took place after the war, for higher wages to meet growing costs because of the end of price control. It dealt with the need for intensified union organization, the fight against racism and discrimination, the growing mood for independent political activity, and the defense of civil liberties.

In 1946 the Chicago Star accused President Truman of departing from the progressive policies of the Roosevelt administration in both domestic and foreign policy matters. Government actions were leading to a cold war, we said, that would split the allied wartime coalition.

- MW: You are not suggesting that you developed that term "cold war." That was part of the general public dialogue at that time, wasn't it?
- Sennett: That was, yes.
- MW: Let me interrupt here. Do you have any knowledge of the Soviet Communist party leadership being aware of the Chicago Star or of giving any guidance to it or of your having any relationship with the Comintern?
- Sennett: None at all. We didn't know whether they were aware of us, but we certainly were aware of them.
- MW: But you would certainly put them on your mailing list, wouldn't you?
- Sennett: No, I don't remember that we did. It may be and I don't recall. It may be that there was a subscription going to some institute in the Soviet Union.
- MW: Is it possible that there would have been a relationship between Moscow or the Comintern and the paper that you wouldn't have been aware of?
- Sennett: I doubt it very much. If anything, let's assume that those members of the Communist party from the United States who may have had some contact with the Comintern or Communist party leaders in Moscow brought them some copies of the paper and may have told them about it. I do not recall any Soviet group, organization, or individual having a subscription.
- MW: Now, the Daily Worker was publishing at this time from New York right?
- Sennett: Yes. There was also a West Coast party paper, the People's World.
- MW: But then the Star was really a very important Communist organ, and I say Communist organ in the sense that the Communist party controlled it.
- Sennett: It was a substitute for a Communist organ and it was not controlled by the Communist party as was the case with the Daily Worker.
- MW: Now, is there any explanation other than what you have given for the fact that you had open Communist organs in New York and San Francisco, but you had in effect a kind of disguised Communist organ in Chicago?

Sennett: This had a lot to do with attempts that were made in the past to reach a broader readership. For example, there was a Communist daily newspaper, The Daily Record, printed in Chicago in the late 30s. Like the People's World, it was not the official organ of the Communist party but unlike the Chicago Star which was non-Communist the People's World and Chicago Daily Record were more openly pro-Communist. Louis Budenz was the editor of the Record and Carl Hirsch was a writer on the paper. But the Daily Record was short-lived. It was not able to get the support that it needed in the Midwest, as finances were always a problem, and it folded up after about a year and a half of its existence.

MW: Is that the famous Louis Budenz who became the kind of militant anti-Communist?

Sennett: Yes. Budenz became an informant for the FBI.

MW: Did you ever know him?

Sennett: I met him, but I really never got to know him.

MW: But you didn't have any connection with that paper or know anything about it?

Sennett: No, I did not. I learned of its existence when I was in Spain.

MW: Are you suggesting that the experience with Budenz and the Record was the explanation for why you had the Star as opposed to--

Sennett: No, I think it had a lot to do with the nature of the level of activity, the organization of the labor movement, and the prospects for a more broadly based readership. Since a number of Communists were actively involved as union organizers and supporters of industrial unionism, and the organization of those unions took place on a large scale in the Chicago area, there was a feeling that a left publication, not an out-and-out Communist publication, could get a lot more support and a lot more circulation and that was more important than having a Communist party organ.

MW: It wasn't in an effort to disguise the Communist aspect of it for fear of anticommunism?

Sennett: No, not at all. The fact that there were a number of open Communists working on the paper and the fact that the paper was rebaited because of that indicated that the Communist party expected that to happen. The feeling of broadening out the circulation base was the primary reason.

- MW: I find it a little unusual that you had no evidence of any international interest in the paper, given the fact that the Communist movement is such an international, fraternal kind of operation, [and] that you yourself had been involved in Spain, and that you had met all of these Communists in France. You had this strong sense of an international movement, and yet here, the way you describe it, we have a paper in Chicago, a very important center in the United States, run by the Communists but apparently not much international interest in it.
- Sennett: I have no way of knowing whether there was any special international interest or how that could be translated into any meaningful political support.
- MW: But wouldn't it seem logical that once you'd gotten the paper going, somebody would say, "Hey, let's send copies to our comrades in Paris and Spain and so forth"?
- Sennett: We may have done that, but it didn't make an impression on me. We were interested in influencing Americans not Russians or other Europeans. If there was any discussion with any of the international leaders of the Communist movement about launching the Star or any question of what they might be able to do to help the Star, I was not privy to it. I certainly would know if there was any other help of any kind because I was in charge of the finances of the paper.
- MW: And there was no Moscow gold as far as--
- Sennett: Absolutely not, and I might have welcomed it. We needed the money.
- MW: Did you reprint a lot of material from the Daily Worker?
- Sennett: We printed some material from the Daily Worker, but in addition to our own reporters and to freelance reporters as well, there was a left-wing press association known as Federated Press, which provided us with a lot of syndicated material and copy.
- MW: Was that a Communist organization?
- Sennett: No, it was not. It was a left-wing news service. Some Communists were working for it.
- MW: Were you aware of a publication of the Cominform during this period called For a Lasting Peace for a People's Democracy?
- Sennett: Surely.
- MW: Did you read that?

Sennett: Yes, I did.

MW: Did you use materials from it?

Sennett: I don't think that the kinds of articles written there would have fitted into our kind of popular paper. Our paper was more popularly written than the Daily Worker or the People's World. We didn't have long essays and long articles or a stilted style.

MW: What did you think of For a Lasting Peace for a People's Democracy?

Sennett: It was tough to get through even though I would agree with its political line. To get back to the Star's editorial policy, our very first editorial made it clear where we stood on foreign policy. We said,

We are unalterably opposed to a foreign policy based on either the preservation of the prewar status quo or its replacement by a new American big money imperialism. We believe unity between the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union is necessary to guard the peace of the world. We are convinced that our foreign policy is being determined by those forces in America who work night and day to condition this nation for an atomic bomb attack on our great ally of less than a year ago.

MW: Who wrote it?

Sennett: This was written by Carl Hirsch, who wrote most of the editorials. Because of our relatively strong labor support among the more progressive union activists, one of the most popular columnists, as I mentioned, was a Communist known as Pop Dearborn. Fred Fine, who was Pop Dearborn, had a keen insight, appreciation, and understanding of labor history and labor's role. Many union officials and union members who read the Star would turn to his column first to pick up tidbits about the labor movement, trends in various unions, and to see what Fred had to say about developments in and outside of the labor movement.

Fred Fine, by the way, had been indicted under the Smith Act in 1951. He was one of those who was called a "second-string Communist" leader and was indicted with fourteen other Communist leaders. As a result of that indictment, he went underground and did not surrender until five years later when the Smith Act had been battered and rendered useless for jailing Communists by the later actions of the Supreme Court.

MW: Does that mean that he was never convicted then?

Sennett: He was never convicted. And indictments under that act were halted in 1955.

A great deal of the political campaigns and independent challenges to the two-party system were reflected in the Star. There was a lot of ferment about the course of the Truman administration and this was, to some extent, reflected in the labor movement.

INDEPENDENT CHALLENGES IN STATE AND LOCAL ELECTIONS

MW: By the way, I don't think we put a date on that first issue.

Sennett: The first issue was July 6, 1946. The Star was unique with respect to the question of independent challenges to the two-party system because to some extent the Star was a participant in the Chicago area as well as a reporter. In the congressional races of 1946, the Chicago Star endorsed the conventional Democratic candidates in most of those races. Most of those candidates were incumbents. It also supported and endorsed two Communist party members who ran for the state legislature as independents. One was Claude Lightfoot who was later to become the chairman of the Illinois district. He was a well-known black political figure in Chicago who ran for the state senate. Sylvia Woods, another black Communist, ran for the state legislature. They both entered the race as independents even though they openly acknowledged that they were Communists.

The Republicans swept most races in the elections for the Eightieth Congress and won control over the Senate and the House of Representatives. This was viewed by the Chicago Star as a blow to labor and as a blow to many of Roosevelt's past legislative acts of that time. True to form, many repressive measures were introduced in the Eightieth Congress, including the setting up of anti-Communist bodies to investigate "subversive organizations," which went beyond the Communist party. The notorious Taft-Hartley Law, which was a blow against the labor movement, was passed in 1947 by that Congress.

MW: Bill, did you have any position on the various veterans' organizations during that period, [such as] the American Veterans Committee?

Sennett: We were very supportive of the American Veterans Committee and quite a number of the leading people from the American Veterans Committee were very supportive of the Chicago Star as well. I was an active member of AVC and believed that it was time to forge a

Sennett: liberal veterans' movement with World War II vets as the main base. Unfortunately, AVC was not able to compete with the government favored American Legion and the Disabled American Veterans' organization.

In the 1947 Chicago alderman elections, the Star encouraged independent challenges to the Democratic machine.

MW: What do you mean by independent challenges? Do you mean people running as independents?

Sennett: People running as independents for city council. There were fifty aldermen to be elected in February of 1947. The council was dominated by the Democratic party machine.

MW: Was this the Daley machine at that early date?

Sennett: Jake Arvey was still the boss of the Democratic party of Chicago and Cook County. Daley, who was the Cook County treasurer, became the chairman of the Cook County Democratic party in 1952 and mayor of Chicago in 1955. But it was a strong, corrupt Democratic machine under Jake Arvey.

MW: Was there any Communist infiltration of the Democratic machine at that period or were they all outside of it?

Sennett: No, the Communists were outside of the Democratic machine and the independent challenges that were made were challenges to the machine.

MW: So that was really the only thing you could do because it was pretty tightly organized?

Sennett: It certainly was.

MW: So if you wanted to challenge city government, you really had to run independents?

Sennett: True. I don't recall a single person who was a Democratic party precinct captain who was in any way sympathetic to the left. Most precinct captains--and there were over five thousand in Chicago at that time--were given full-time jobs and worked for the city or the county. That was the payoff for being a precinct captain and being able to control and deliver votes in their bailiwicks.

In 1947, when the Chicago Star took the lead in raising the question of a challenge to that machine, it was able to get the support of the developing Progressive party. It was then called the Progressive Citizens of America. The PCA began to undertake the actual campaign to help bring about those independent

Sennett: challenges along with the support of the Communist party and the left-wing trade unions.

MW: Was the Progressive Citizens of America a Communist organization?

Sennett: No, it was not.

MW: The Communists were involved in it, though.

Sennett: The Communists were definitely involved, were very supportive, and very helpful in making it all happen. The steps that were taken by the PCA and the left trade unions were to encourage active candidacies. In the February 1947 elections, they were successful in making that possible. Fifteen out of the total of fifty wards had independents entered in the political fray. Special inserts were printed in the Chicago Star by the campaign committees of each of these fifteen candidates and special issues of the paper were printed and used by the various campaign committees challenging the Democratic machine. Though none of these candidates won--in fact, the Democratic machine still counted the votes and was able to control the votes so that most of their victories were overwhelming against the independent candidates--it nevertheless succeeded in laying the basis for a much more spectacular challenge to machine control in the superior court judge races that took place later that year in November.

MW: Now, when you said that they counted the votes, are you suggesting they won by fraud?

Sennett: I'm suggesting that they were able to count enough votes to make it as high as they intended.

MW: But they would have won?

Sennett: They would have won, but they would not have won by some of the staggering numbers that they were able to record. The Progressive party that was to nominate Henry Wallace as its presidential candidate in 1948 was organized later in 1947 and it was able to build an Illinois organization and a Chicago organization with the support of many left labor, and liberal activists. The Chicago organization was a spirited movement of progressives which brought together thousands of hopeful people. A former freelance correspondent of the Chicago Star, Zal Garfield, became the Chicago director of the Progressive party, and an astute, New York labor attorney, Bill Miller, had moved to Chicago and became the state chairman of the Progressive party.

Incidentally, Zal Garfield later became a businessman in Philadelphia and was the campaign manager in the 70s for Milton Schapp, a former Progressive party member, who was elected

Sennett: as the governor of Pennsylvania. Schapp also made an abortive attempt to run in the Democratic primaries for the presidency in 1976.

MW: Were Garfield and Miller Communists?

Sennett: Miller was a Communist and I'm not sure about Garfield.

SENSE OF POSTWAR MOOD

MW: Bill, can I ask you something about the mood of this time? The United States didn't suffer from the war as the Europeans did and basically this was a period of considerable prosperity, wasn't it? There were problems of price control and so forth, but the immediate postwar period was not what you would call bad times.

Sennett: There was a short-lived recession in 1946. After all, my plant, Studebaker, which had been started up in order to produce war materials, had seven thousand workers and that was phased out. And not all of those people got jobs. The same was true of the Buick and Ford plants that were opened up in Chicago. So there was a period of phasing out of war materials, and even though there were jobs opening up in civilian and consumer products that were necessary at that time, there was a gap between the time of shutdowns and the start-up for civilian production.

MW: What was your mood, as you can remember, [in assessing] potential for the success of left-wing movements at the time?

Sennett: I had a very positive mood. I felt that even though there were some negative measures being taken by the Truman administration, against progressives and against the Communist and labor movement, that people were more willing to listen to programs for positive change and that Communist and left-wing points of view would be given a broader hearing. I was also encouraged in this mood by virtue of the fact that the Soviet Union had been an ally of the United States, and I believed that the Soviet Union and the United States would therefore be able to work together despite many differences. I thought that the Soviet Union had made enough of an impact as a major factor in winning the war that the American people would prevail upon their government to work in harmony with that country.

MW: Okay, but beginning in 1946, there was the opening bit of the anti-Soviet campaign. That is, the Soviet Union had remained in Iran and we made a big fuss about that to get Soviet troops out of Iran, and then there were problems over Germany. So already there

MW: was the beginning of an expression of anti-Soviet sentiment. I can remember editorials as early as 1947 in the West Coast papers asking whether we were going to have to fight another war with the Soviet Union after we had just finished one with Germany. Were you aware of any of this?

Sennett: Oh, yes, but I looked upon those developments as temporary--as something that the military and reactionary elements were fomenting. I felt there was a great desire for peace and a large residue of goodwill and that the great mass of people would not necessarily be taken in by this kind of propaganda. Of course, I proved to be wrong, especially when the war in Korea broke out. The American people, in their majority, from the beginning accepted the Truman Doctrine and the cold war.

MW: How important was foreign policy at this particular moment? Were your thoughts and your activities governed primarily by your appreciation of the domestic scene or was foreign policy a major factor in your political thinking at this time?

Sennett: I think it was a fifty-fifty proposition. There were so many problems about reconversion, so many strikes going on, so much activity taking place in order to increase wages, organize more unions, and provide jobs and housing, that this obviously was a major factor in the issues of those times.

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MW: Yes. Did you have a final footnote that you wanted to put on the Wartime Alliance?

Sennett: There was a great concern, at least by those of us who were Communists and by many progressives, about foreign policy. The strains that were evident in Germany by the three occupying powers were leading to some very serious consequences. We were concerned about the kind of de-Nazification that was undertaken in the American zone and felt that the process was not going to be a thoroughgoing one.

We were also concerned about the matter of the atom bomb as indicated by the expression of the Star editorial with respect to its possible consequent use. These factors were evident in our thinking and the Chicago Star had something to say about this quite regularly.

THE STAR, ELECTIONS, AND THE PROGRESSIVE PARTY

Sennett: But getting back to the matter of the role of the Star in the elections and the role of the Progressive party, there was some new political momentum, at least in 1947 and 1948. The Progressive party decided to challenge the monopoly agreement by the Democratic and Republican machines who controlled the twenty-one judges of the superior court in Cook County. Generally, the Republican and Democratic party, with the Democrats in the driver's seat, decided on who would end up being on the slate. There was generally no opposition to the slate for twenty-one judges to be elected. It was a deal, and the election was usually a formality.

This time, the Progressive party challenged that slate-making process and pointed out that there were no blacks on the bench, there were no women judges, and the kind of election that was held was a farce. The Progressive party, therefore, nominated a full slate of candidates of their own, which included three black attorneys and one woman. It was able to get support from the black lawyers association in Chicago and the conservative Chicago Bar Association undertook an analysis of all candidates including those on the Progressive party ticket. They endorsed two of the Progressive party candidates.

MW: Was the Progressive party being redbaited at this time?

Sennett: To some extent. But it was difficult for the red baiters at this point because the commercial press didn't buy the red herring. There was a very stimulating and large-scale campaign around the judicial ticket, and several of the Progressive party candidates were endorsed by the commercial press. As a result, there was a high vote for this judicial campaign in which over seven hundred thousand people voted. This election embraced Chicago and the more conservative majority Republican constituencies in the suburbs. The leading candidate on the Progressive party slate was a man named Homer F. Carey, who got over three hundred thousand votes out of seven hundred thousand votes cast, and he lost by only twenty thousand votes. The straight slate vote for the entire Progressive party ticket was a hundred and six thousand.

In addition to extensive studies and other publicity about the campaign, the Chicago Star published an election guide for use in the campaign, and these were sold to those candidates who had campaign committees to be used as they saw fit.

Despite severe financial problems, the Chicago Star managed to survive and grow to a circulation of some 25,000. This was a highwater mark for a left publication in Chicago.

MW: When did it reach that?

Sennett: It reached that figure some time in 1947 when the paper was about a year old. But because of initial undercapitalization and severe continuing financial problems we were always in a bind.

THE PAPER CHANGES HANDS AND CHANGES NAMES

Sennett: In an effort to provide a broader communications base for the emerging Progressive party, the Chicago Star was sold to a group of the Progressive Party backers, who then renamed that paper the Illinois Standard. This was after about two years of the existence of the Star.

MW: What did that mean relative to the Communist party control of the paper?

Sennett: As far as the Communist party was concerned, it was still supportive but less directly involved in circulation building and editorial consultation. Ken McKenzie, the new editor, was not a Communist. Some of the staff remained, but there were a few changes made. However, the Illinois Standard was short-lived because it eventually merged with the National Guardian and that's where the National Guardian got its Midwest base of subscribers that helped to boost its circulation in Illinois and the Midwest.

MW: I don't understand the reason for this sale.

Sennett: Basically it was financial in the sense that we felt that we could not raise the kind of money to keep it going.

MW: "We" being the people who--

Sennett: "We" being the People's Publishing Association with the agreement of the Communist party. The Communist party could not raise that kind of money by itself. The People's Publishing Association was not able to come up with the kind of money that was needed to keep the Star. An infusion of added capital was necessary. Some Progressive party supporters felt that a change reflecting the growth and potential of their new movement would lay the basis for substantial contributions to fund the paper and enable it to secure a much larger readership. But that money never came through, especially after Henry Wallace, the Progressive party candidate for President in 1948, failed to get much more than a million votes in that election. The Illinois Standard then

Sennett: decided to provide its readership as a base for the new national progressive publication called the National Guardian.

MW: The Guardian wasn't in existence while the Star was still the Star, was it?

Sennett: No, it came into existence in 1948, when the Illinois Standard had taken over.

MW: What I am trying to get at is that here the Communist party has in effect its own organ, the Star. Granted, it was not an official Communist party organ but it was Communist controlled. Communists were in all of the key decision-making places in the publication, right?

Sennett: But the Communists weren't as obsessed with the question of control, per se, as you seem to imply. The Communist party was more interested in building a non-Communist widely circulated progressive paper than in having "control" over a publication with a narrower base. And, in 1948 it appeared that a much broader movement was being built by the Progressive party. And financially the Illinois district of the Communist party was in a poor position to raise the money needed to keep the Star going.

MW: But the Star was a success, wasn't it?

Sennett: Not financially. The [income from] 25,000 subs, most of them short term at one dollar for twenty weeks and two dollars fifty for a one-year sub, was hardly much of a subsistence income. Advertising revenue was very low and an operating deficit could only be made up by contributions.

THE QUESTION OF "MOSCOW GOLD"

MW: Were you ever involved in any discussions about what to do with this and how to handle that problem?

Sennett: Yes, I was.

MW: Did anybody ever raise the question of "can we get some money from the Communist International?"

Sennett: Absolutely not. If there was such a thing as "Moscow gold" for American Communist activities, I certainly never knew or heard about it.

MW: But why not? Did it ever occur to you?

Sennett: No, it never occurred to me because I never believed that the Communist party got money from the Communist International or from Moscow.

MW: But the idea wouldn't have seemed to you to be a bad idea, would it?

Sennett: I never raised the question because I didn't think it was a realistic prospect. And if I had, a lot of eyebrows would have been lifted and I would have been suspected of being naive or a provocateur.

MW: You didn't talk about them because it was theoretically a bad idea or you didn't talk about them because people suspected that kind of thing might be happening and it would be better not to talk about it?

Sennett: Some people might have suspected that might be happening. But it was hard for me to see any evidence of that. It was obvious that the Daily Worker was having a hard time raising the money to keep afloat. And, if the Daily Worker was getting money from the Communist International, it was not getting enough money because it was underpayng its staff and unable to stabilize its financial condition.

MW: Was there considerable worry at this time about provocateurs and informers?

Sennett: To a limited extent. There was always some discussion about that as a possibiity, but it was not paranoid. The transition, therefore, that took place from the Star to the Standard to the National Guardian, at least gave those readers who had signed up with the Star an opportunity to get a publication which was able to have a little more breadth and had a national scope and in the first years of its existence was a very significant publication that reached a circulation of seventy-five to eighty thousand.

MW: So the Communist party didn't lose any vehicle with which to get its position before the people of Chicago by these transitions. It wasn't weakened in terms of a propaganda organ?

Sennett: It was weakened only from the point of view that many of the trade unionists who read the Chicago Star—because there was a campaign that went on to get them to read it--did not sustain their readership.

MW: After it became the Standard?

Sennett: After it became the National Guardian. The Guardian was a national publication. It was a little harder to read, and there was no apparatus for getting subscriptions and organizational support from among the left-wing trade union members.

MW: How did you look upon the Guardian at that time?

Sennett: Very favorably; I welcomed it. It was a high-quality informative publication.

MW: Now, this put you out of a job in effect.

Sennett: Well, that didn't matter. Those kinds of jobs, I felt, were secondary to political needs. I did not take a responsibility in the Communist party or anywhere else in the left-wing movement with the idea that this would give me a job. The place for better paying, relatively more secure jobs was outside of the movement in the business world.

MW: No, but you had been a publicist, a propagandist, and an educator in effect in the army and then in this role. I assume you probably had a certain amount of pride about this paper. Didn't you feel kind of badly?

Sennett: I certainly felt sorry that the paper had to make the kind of transition that it did. However, I considered that it was the most practical thing to do in view of our financial status and that it was politically advisable to make the changes attempted.

MW: You didn't seek an opportunity to go to work for the Guardian?

Sennett: No, the Guardian was printed in New York. I certainly did not want to go to New York. And I didn't consider a business manager or a publisher's role as a career. The needs of the party came first.

MW: How long did the Standard survive?

Sennett: The Standard was published for about six months.

MW: You were not connected with that?

Sennett: No, I was not.

MW: Who took that over?

Sennett: There were three people that I recall. One was Ken McKenzie as editor, who had been a leader of the American Veterans Committee. Another was Bernie Asbel, who was both a writer and a folk singer. He was a very good friend of Pete Seeger's.

MW: Were they both Communists?

Sennett: No, McKenzie was not and I am not sure about Bernie Asbel. I don't recall.

MW: But there wasn't any lessening of Communist influence with the transition to the Standard?

Sennett: Not necessarily with the Standard. There was a fellow named Joe Persley, who had been an organizer, a business agent for the United Electrical Workers Union, who took my place as the general manager of the paper. I was in contact with him for the period of the existence of the Standard.

MW: Now, you haven't said anything today about your wife in this period. She had previously been very active in party work. What was she doing during this period?

Sennett: Well, my wife Gussie had been working at the Packing House Workers Union district office until the birth of our second daughter Judy on June 28, 1947. Gussie then took a leave of absence from her job for about a year. She was still a Communist party activist.

MW: She wasn't connected with the paper?

Sennett: No, she was not.

VIII Year of Seige: Working Class Racism and Capitalist Progressivism

[Interview 8: December 2, 1981]##

MW: Bill, we are in the middle of 1948 and you had just gone through the period when the Chicago Star came to an end. What did you do next?

UNION ORGANIZING IN THE AUTO INDUSTRY

Sennett: I was winding up my work with the Chicago Star when the party suggested that my new assignment should be full-time work as the section organizer of the auto section. The auto industry was one of the main party national concentration industries. The International Union of United Automobile, Aircraft and Agricultural Workers had become the largest union in the CIO with almost one million members, and the election of Walter Reuther and his supporters to the leadership of the union was regarded by us as a serious blow to the left-wing and moderate forces.

MW: This then was regarded as a victory of the right wing.

Sennett: Yes it was. And the National Committee of the Communist Party decided to strengthen its work in the auto section by setting up a national auto commission to direct its strategy and coordinate its work. Saul Wellman, a New York party leader and a veteran of the Spanish Civil War and of World War II, was sent to Detroit to head the newly created commission. I became the organizer of the Illinois auto section and a member of Wellman's group.

MW: How many Communists worked in the auto industry?

Sennett: In 1946 there were about three thousand members of the party in the auto industry. About half lived in Michigan and about three hundred in Illinois. However, in 1948 that membership was cut in half in Illinois as a result of the closing down or conversion of large war production plants, such as Studebaker, Ford, and Buick. When I worked at the Studebaker plant in Chicago in 1942, there were seven thousand people employed at its peak. By 1947, the facility had been converted to a retail chain's merchandising warehouse.

MW: What was the total Communist party membership in the country in 1948?

Sennett: Approximately forty-five thousand members. The Communist party played a very significant role in the organization of the auto workers union. Long before the organization of the CIO in the auto plants, Communists were doing important spadework to develop union consciousness among the workers. There were Communist party unit organizations in a number of shops when the American Federation of Labor granted a charter to the United Automobile Workers Union in 1935. And when the UAW became part of the Committee for Industrial Organization, the Communists had a number of experienced and capable leaders and organizers who came to the fore. Some, like Wyndham Mortimer and Robert Travis, among the founders of the union, became leaders of the international executive board and other key union bodies.

MW: Walter Reuther became president of the International Union of Auto Workers in 1946. What was his relationship to the Communists and to the left?

Sennett: Reuther's father was a union leader and had been a Socialist. Walter and his brothers also joined the Socialist party. He had been a toolmaker at the Ford plant. When he was laid off in the early 30s, he and his brother Victor took a trip to the Soviet Union and worked in a Russian auto plant for about a year and a half.

Though Walter and Victor were, at one time, friendly to the Soviet Union, they were not Communists. Walter, Victor, and Roy Reuther became active in the CIO organizing drive in the auto industry and Walter became president of a large UAW local. He was later elected to the executive board of the International Union and a vice president before replacing R. J. Thomas for president in 1946.

Walter Reuther worked with the Communists and other left-wingers in the early days of union organization. However, he quit the Socialist party and began to form alliances with certain

Sennett: moderate and right-wing forces in the union. The moderate leadership of the union led by the president, R. J. Thomas, and secretary-treasurer, George Addes, cooperated with the left in opposition to Reuther in the early 40s. And the Reuther forces were hardening their antileft positions in the process.

MW: What was your perception at the time of the reason for Reuther's anticommunism?

Sennett: When I was in the party and active as a member of the auto commission, I looked upon it mainly as an ideological struggle. Reuther had turned against socialism. He was anti-Soviet, he had capitulated to capitalist programs and capitalist ideology. I viewed Reuther as an opportunist who would make any unprincipled compromise to capture the leadership of the union.

COMMUNIST PARTY ORGANIZATION IN ILLINOIS

Sennett: The auto section of the Communist party in Illinois was an industrial section; that is, all branches or clubs, as they were called, were composed of shopworkers who worked in the industry. Most other sections of the Communist party were organized on a neighborhood basis. In that sense, it was unique. We were able to concentrate more directly in the industry. This made it possible to coordinate our work in auto where people worked. We could be more specific about policies, activities, and goals to be achieved.

MW: I don't think we have talked yet about the term "cell," have we?

Sennett: That was an old term used to designate party units or local neighborhood or shop branches. The designation of a local structure was changed over the years. As far as I can recall, when I joined the party they were called units. In the 1920s they were called cells. The progression of the name over time for a basic party group was cell, unit, branch, or club.

MW: And those were all essentially the same in your terminology?

Sennett: They were essentially the same, yes. At one time, neighborhood branches were organized with larger numbers of people.

MW: There wasn't any kind of hierarchy of organizations as in the military like regiment, battalion, and company? There was just a unit, a basic unit, and it was called one of those things.

- Sennett: Yes, and the number of people who were part of the basic unit or group varied. You might have as little as five to seven people, and this was particularly true in some shops where there weren't large numbers of people or where there were limited numbers in order to protect the jobs of people. There could have been as many as fifty or seventy-five in a branch, but the party preferred to have smaller groups as time went on. It felt that it was easier to involve people more directly with smaller numbers in attendance.
- MW: Did they ever get together in meetings of all of these groups?
- Sennett: Yes, sometimes. It depends upon the political period. If the party was not under open attack and if there was no fear of exposing the identity of party members, then there would be section membership meetings and even city-wide membership meetings. But this was not done very often.
- MW: Members of a given cell or branch or club, did they know people who were members of other cells, branches, and clubs? Was it possible for a Communist to know all of the other Communists or was there in essence a kind of compartmentalization if the party had to go underground in order that people wouldn't know other people and be able to give them away?
- Sennett: It depended on the historical period. There were times when the party took security measures to protect its members from discrimination or from loss of jobs, but there were also periods when most members, particularly in the section subdivisions, could get to know the other members. With FBI infiltration and the Chicago police department's "Red Squad," the authorities pretty well knew most members of the Communist party. And, of course, there were a number of mass meetings, demonstrations, parades, and social events where party members, sympathizers, and other left wingers would gather from time to time. There were informers within the ranks reporting on those in attendance in addition to the visible local police and camouflaged FBI agents.
- MW: Were you aware at that time of any underground organizations of the CP?
- Sennett: There was an "underground" or unavailable organization set up during the McCarthy period when the party made a conscious decision to protect the organization in the 1950s. There were some groups--a club or a unit of professionals, or shopworkers at other periods in our history who had to protect their members' identity because of possible harrassment or loss of position if CP membership was known. And there were some people who preferred not being part of a club or unit because they feared it might

Sennett: jeopardize their position. These few individuals would meet individually with certain club or section organizers.

MW: Could we summarize this by saying that there was a structure of open cells, semi-open cells, and secret cells in the party at that time?

Sennett: No, to my knowledge in the Illinois district there were no secret cells and no underground cells except for the special circumstances I mentioned during the McCarthy period.

MW: I was using the word "secret" to apply to those people who were government workers who didn't want it known that they were Communists.

Sennett: We didn't have that in Illinois. I understand that there may have been some of that at one time in Hollywood and in Washington, but we did not have that in Illinois.

MW: You would have been aware of it had it existed?

Sennett: At least I would have been one of the people to have been aware of it in Illinois.

The mission of our shop branches or clubs was to organize more members into the union, to strengthen the union, and to help activize other people. We especially felt that it was important to develop a greater degree of union consciousness among the rank and file and we would press for education and classes so that more members could understand the role that a union should be playing. In the process, we would try to recruit people into the party, sell our party literature, discuss our politics, and generally try to win friends and influence people.

I was still a member of the auto workers' union before going into the auto section, having taken a withdrawal card when I entered the service. The auto workers section was known as the Carl Leiber section. It was named after a former party functionary and good friend of mine who had headed that section before he was killed in Europe during World War II.

ACQUIRING PROPERTY AND ENCOUNTERING RACISM

Sennett: In 1949, friends of ours, Aaron and Louise Bindman, suggested that Gussie and I consider buying a two-flat building with them that we could share. We had never owned any property and we thought it

Sennett: might be a good idea if we could swing it. The Bindmans had seen a building with two flats that could be bought for eleven thousand dollars with fifteen hundred dollars down, and we thought it would be a good idea, since our share would be \$750 down. We borrowed the money from Gussie's parents, and we were able to swing the deal. Our payments were lower than rent for our previous apartment and in addition we had a yard for the kids with some other advantages of home ownership.

Aaron Bindman was secretary-treasurer of the Chicago warehouse local of the International Longshore and Warehouseman's Union. Soon after we moved into our home at 56th and Peoria Street, he arranged a stewards' meeting in his flat, and that was the beginning of what resulted in a violent outbreak of opposition to us by neighbors and outsiders. That incident caused our two families to live under police guard for a year until we moved out.

Aaron's steward body attending the meeting in his flat on the first floor consisted of sixteen people, half of whom were black. In this working class neighborhood of mostly Irish Catholics, that seemed to give some people the idea that black people had moved into the neighborhood.

MW: Now, you are talking just about one meeting.

Sennett: One meeting.

MW: He had a meeting of stewards--in the daytime?

Sennett: No, this was an early evening meeting. It was a meeting which took place where they ordered some fast food to be delivered to the house.

MW: But it was light so people could see people going in and out of the house, is that it?

Sennett: It was still daylight when the stewards gathered for this meeting as the meeting was after work--around 4:30 p.m.

MW: How many black people attended that meeting?

Sennett: I believe that half of those in attendance were black, eight people.

MW: How did this upset the neighborhood? I don't understand. You just have eight people come to the house and they immediately assume that they are moving in?

Sennett: They didn't know us and they knew that newcomers had moved in. We had only lived in the house for several weeks. We didn't know any of our neighbors, and the first thing they took notice of was that there were some blacks in the neighborhood coming into our house and that other blacks were visiting them.

MW: I remember you talking in one of our earlier sessions about your having moved into a district with a black family much earlier. Being a member of a party which looks upon the working class as the most progressive element in the society, wouldn't it be logical that one of the first things that you would do in moving into that neighborhood would be to establish some kind of a rapport with the working-class people there? Isn't it a little unusual that you didn't have any kind of rapport with the neighborhood?

Sennett: We talked about that in retrospect. You are correct. We didn't have any rapport with people in the neighborhood. We hadn't taken the time to do that, although that was our intention. The incident happened too quickly, before we had been settled in the house. We bought the house because we needed a place to live and it was affordable. We didn't think of the move as part of a political or social act of breaking down prejudices or establishing an integrated neighborhood. We didn't think that black visitors in the neighborhood would create a stir. We thought it was a pretty safe neighborhood, in the sense that these were working people and a number of them worked in shops with blacks. Some of them were members of the left-led packinghouse workers union.

MW: But you were professional agitators and propagandists. I mean it would seem to me that at that time one of the first things you would do would be to go out and propagandize the neighborhood.

Sennett: I wish we knew then [laughs] what we only realized later. It was a mistake on our part to assume that we could move in like other ordinary people and have our neighbors accept us and our friends as equals. Obviously, having meetings at the house, having blacks come to visit was quite different than other ordinary people who lived on Peoria Street.

MW: The image that this presents to me is that Communists in that period were pretty much like everybody else; that is, that they carried on their business work and their agitation at the appropriate place for that, but when they come home at night, they just come home and they don't think of the neighborhood as being part of their agitation and propaganda. In other words, you were not twenty-four-hours-a-day agitators.

- Sennett: In some sense we were. The fact is that Communists went to meetings every night of the week and we used our homes for meetings too, so that people were coming and going much more than they do with those families who were not politically involved as we were. So we should have thought about it and we should have done some work in advance. Those were things that kind of came naturally to us, holding a meeting and having blacks coming to your house. We did it all the time and we didn't think of the consequences in that new neighborhood.
- MW: You apparently were not aware of the depth of prejudice against blacks in the working class.
- Sennett: I think we were aware, but when we moved into the house, we didn't think through properly in terms of what that meant for us specifically.
- MW: So what happened?
- Sennett: A crowd gathered shortly after the meeting started and I remember coming home a little later and seeing a group of about fifty to sixty people in front of the house. I asked what was going on. Well, they didn't know who I was and didn't know I lived in the house and they told me that some black people had moved into this house. I let those people know that I was one of those who lived in the house. I lived on the second floor and the Bindmans lived on the first floor. I didn't even know there was a stewards' meeting going on, so I didn't know what it was all about. I said that there were no blacks living in the house, but that we certainly didn't bar blacks and we had black friends and they probably would come to visit. It was only later that I learned that Aaron had called a stewards' meeting and that the meeting was going on at the time.
- MW: How did they react when you told them that?
- Sennett: They began to make some hostile remarks and, obviously, I quickly realized that I was not among friends.
- MW: That was a surprise to you?
- Sennett: Well, it was a surprise to me to see a crowd in front of the house. It was a surprise to me that the prejudice I knew existed had resulted in an open confrontation on the matter. In any case, I made it clear to my neighbors that we didn't discriminate against blacks and that we had black friends and we would have black visitors. I suggested that they respect our right to have whatever friends we wished at our house as we respected their right to visitors and friends of their choice at theirs.

MW: But did you expect them to accept that?

Sennett: I didn't think that they would readily agree but I hoped they would be fair minded in retrospect. We had lived in other white communities, and other neighbors had tolerated what they considered were our idiosyncracies. There had been some hostility by a few people but there were never any threats and certainly there was no violence.

In any case, I went into the house to see Aaron and to apprise him of the gathering crowd. He apparently hadn't noticed, because it was already dark and with the meeting in progress, the people inside the house didn't hear the noise on the outside. I told him that the people sounded a little unruly and that I thought that it would be advisable to call the police to ask them to disperse the crowd, since they had rejected my proposal to do so. We agreed, and two police officers were sent in by the local precinct. We talked to the police, told them about the meetings, and suggested that they disperse the crowd in front of the house. They moved out among the crowd but took no steps to disperse the people. They simply crossed the street and nodded to people they knew, allowing the gathering to continue with their encouragement. The crowd finally broke up about nine or nine-thirty at night. We thought that would be the end of it, that we would then have the opportunity to get to know our neighbors, to cultivate their friendship and to get to know each other better.

OFFICIALDOM TAKES NO ACTION AGAINST VIOLENCE

Sennett: But we never had a chance to do that because the next night-- though Aaron's friends were gone, there was no meeting, there were no blacks in the house--another crowd began to gather. This time it was a larger and even more hostile crowd. Within a few hours after the crowd began to gather (at about 8 p.m.) with the police standing by and doing nothing, the crowd grew to over two hundred people. A few rocks were thrown, breaking the windows on the first floor that night, and there were some jeers and shouts and we decided to get the kids out of the house. My two children-- Barbara and Judy--were eight and two and a half years of age, respectively. We thought it would be better to have the kids out of the house and invite some friends in to protect against further damage. It was clear that the cops were not on our side.

Sennett: The fact that the windows were broken on the second night and that a crowd of a couple of hundred people gathered caused us to call the city's Commission on Human Relations. It was obvious to us after the two nights that the sympathies of the police who had come and done nothing to disperse the crowd were with the neighborhood and with the crowd and obviously were prejudicial against us.

The Chicago Commission on Human Relations called the police commissioner to suggest that crowd control measures be undertaken, that no groups be allowed to congregate in front of the house. This was an elementary police procedure. Additionally, damage to our property had been caused and no effort had been made to arrest the perpetrators. The commission warned that matters could worsen. The police commissioner launched into a tirade against the Commission on Human Relations and in effect told them to stay out of his affairs. He said he had things under control and he didn't need the Human Relations Commission's advice. He made it clear that he didn't like the commission in any case.

On the third night of mob action, about five hundred people gathered and while the police forced the crowd back across the street this time, they did not disperse the group. There were more windows smashed on all sides of the house as small groups infiltrated from the rear alley entrance.

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MW: Okay, the crowd ran around to the back and started smashing windows in the back.

Sennett: Aaron and I had called upon some of our friends to come to the house to help provide protection. We had about twenty friends inside the house with us on the first and the second floor in his flat and in mine upstairs. We also had other friends mingling with the mob. It was our friends who had to chase the hoodlums who had smashed the windows by entering through the rear. The police did not stop the perpetrators at all.

MW: There were police officers there and they were simply watching the windows being smashed?

Sennett: There were about a half a dozen cops on the street side but none of them were in the rear at the entrance through the alley. A delegation of our supporters went down to the local police station while other friends called downtown headquarters to insist that the police provide enough of a force to disperse the growing crowd.

Sennett: We realized that we couldn't rely on the police for even a minimum of protection, and more of our friends and supporters came to the neighborhood and to our house to help. They began to mix with the crowd, to talk to people who had gathered and try to find out what was stirring them up. They tried to pacify or neutralize our neighbors and isolate those who were inciting to violence. I would guess that on the fourth night, when about a thousand people gathered, about two hundred of those people were friends of ours. As a result there were more visible signs of reasonableness and even sympathy by a number of people living in the neighborhood. But obviously, in a mob, a handful of people can make things get nasty, and reasonable people did not prevail that night. There was more window smashing, fights broke out, dozens of people were hurt, and the police began arresting friend and foe alike. Several cars were overturned. Three people in a passing jeep were stopped, taken out, and badly beaten. An effort was made to set the house on fire. Dozens of our friends and supporters were arrested along with some of the more violent members of the mob.

The police threw some of our friends into the same cells with members of the mob and a number of our supporters were beaten up in the station. The hostility of the local police showed itself at every opportunity they could get, whether encouraging the mob, allowing people to be beaten, arrested, or harrassed.

At the height of the outbreak of mob violence there were voices in the crowd shouting "keep the niggers out," "kill the Jews," and "get the Commies."

MW: How did they get the notion that this had anything to do with the Communists?

Sennett: The people in the police department who were supportive of the mob undoubtedly provided them with information that Aaron and I were Communists and that we were both Jewish. A number of people were singled out as "looking like Jews" and beaten up in the process. The local politicians were part of the Democratic party machine with ties to city hall. The Democratic alderman in the sixteenth ward, Paul Sheridan, was a known racist, and let it be known in the neighborhood that it would be best if we were forced out of the house.

On the fifth night of the siege, the police department, due to growing pressures, finally put some emergency measures into effect. By this time, of course, the city was in an uproar. The story of Peoria Street was prominently reported in the press. There were appeals by civic leaders for an end to mob violence. There was an editorial in the Chicago Daily News, calling on the

Sennett: police department to disperse the crowds and protect our rights. Things were getting a little out of hand, and Mayor Kennelly finally ordered the police department to take emergency measures to stop the crowd from committing further violence and assure us the protection to which we were entitled.

MW: Did you get fair press coverage of this?

Sennett: In the main, the press was sympathetic with us.

MW: Were the first night's incidents reported?

Sennett: No, the first night's and the second night's incidents were not reported. As I recall, we started to get coverage when the crowds grew in size and the Human Relations Commission made a public statement about it.

MW: You didn't call the newspapers reporting the events in the first place?

Sennett: No, I did not. The police emergency measures on the fifth night led to roping off the streets and a closing of taverns. Taverns for many blocks around were closed and cars were kept moving. Groups were not permitted to gather, and finally after five nights of mob violence the overt attacks were ended.

LIVING UNDER POLICE GUARD

Sennett: After the mob attacks ceased, police guards were stationed in the front and rear of the house. They built a guard shack on the street curb in front of the house and in the alley leading to the rear entrance. These police guards were stationed there for the entire year that we remained on Peoria Street. They did provide a measure of protection that we had not had before. While crowds did not gather at the house any more while we still lived there, we were still subjected to harassment and there was constant tension, especially for the children. Rocks were thrown from time to time by isolated individuals. There was another attempt to set the house on fire, and there was always something going wrong with something in the way of our services. We had trouble with the telephone. We had trouble with the electricity. We had trouble with the gas. We don't know how, but apparently there were many people who worked in city hall and in some of the departments who were determined to inconvenience us.

Sennett: Our kids were not able to play on the streets except under supervision because some of the parents of other children in the neighborhood forbade their children to play with our kids. We then took the time to cultivate certain people and found a number who abhorred the violence and with whom we became friendly. Some of them openly let their kids play with ours, but some of them also would do it under cover of secrecy in their own house. They didn't want the neighbors to see their kids playing with ours.

MW: Did the kids have problems in school?

Sennett: Yes. Barbara was in grammar school with some neighborhood kids but other kids went to parochial school. She was taunted by some kids. She was called a "kike" and told her parents were "Commies." Judy went to a nursery school out of the neighborhood and did not have Barbara's problems. Barbara, who was eight years old, had a police guard; usually a squad car followed her to school and back daily. While she was reasonably secure physically, the experience was a traumatic one for her.

MW: How did you get on with the policemen who were camped outside your door?

Sennett: Generally they were not friendly. They were there doing their duty but kept their distance. Occasionally one of the policemen on duty would show some warmth. We would bring out coffee to those on duty and most accepted it. There was one policeman who was friendlier than the rest. He didn't sympathize with our politics but he expressed interest and concern for us as human beings. He was careful not to be seen to be too friendly when his buddies were around.

MW: Do you think the attitude of the police was a matter of official police policy or was it simply the attitude that the cops had from their own world view?

Sennett: I think it was a little of both. I think that a sympathetic policeman would have made some overtures, but he would have to be careful because the police commissioner was not friendly to us. Human relations was not part of a policeman's training in Chicago.

The people in that neighborhood were overwhelmingly Catholic and we attempted to get the church to intervene, to speak to their parishioners about the brotherhood of man, discrimination, civil rights. We were met with blank stares by the parish priests to whom we talked. They would see us but did not even pretend that they were going to do anything, but listened in silence to our story and had nothing to say. They didn't preach to their flock

Sennett: about the incidents and acted oblivious to what was happening in their neighborhood.

Other churches did take a stand but they were not in the neighborhood. The Jewish community throughout the city came to our support, but so did Lutheran churches, Presbyterians, and Baptist churches and the churches in the black community. There were all kinds of statements and other expressions of support by churches and religious groups around the city but nothing from the Catholic church.

MW: But maybe that was the church that was in the neighborhood. None of the churches that supported you were in the neighborhood.

Sennett: That's right.

MW: The Catholic church had to live with those people, too.

Sennett: I don't recall hearing from a Catholic church outside of the neighborhood in another community. One would have expected that because, after all, there are Catholic churches that take social stands and some are more conscientious about those things.

We decided after consultation with our friends that we could not rely on the police for continuing protection. It seemed that it would go on and on. We were prevailed upon by our friends and the Communist party to sell the house and finally move out of the neighborhood.

MW: Are you saying that this was a Communist party decision?

Sennett: It wasn't a decision; it was based upon consultation with the party. I discussed it with the party from the point of view of the political implications of leaving a neighborhood where we were under attack, because this had become a political and social issue which was not directed against us personally. We wanted to consider what that would do to the struggle for civil rights. Would we abandon that struggle if we moved? It was the considered opinion of the party that we would not, that we had done all we could, and that we had laid the groundwork to make a breakthrough so that blacks and whites could some day in the near future live in that community.

MW: But that wasn't your intent in moving into the house in the first place?

Sennett: No, it wasn't, but it had eventually become the issue. It grew into that issue as a result of the way in which the attacks were launched against us. We did not move in with the intention of

Sennett: making a breakthrough in the neighborhood, but it was forced upon us. As a result, we therefore consulted with our black friends as well and we then agreed to sell the house and move out.

MW: Did you really want to move out?

Sennett: Yes, we did. After all, it was very stressful to our children and to ourselves. We couldn't relax, and being a Communist functionary in itself was something that caused a lot of stress in a hostile political climate.

MW: What would you have done if the party had said, "No, we want you to remain there as an example?"

Sennett: If the party had said so, we would have remained there. We would have conceded to that judgment. There were differences of opinion at the time and we discussed it with different people and groups. There seemed to be a consensus that we should move out. By the way, before we moved, one of the forms of continuing harrassment was our inability to get insurance on the house. Our insurance was cancelled over and over again. After all, the house was damaged. We couldn't get fire insurance, we couldn't get insurance against physical damage of any kind. The mortgage originally was in the hands of an unfriendly bank and they threatened to call in the loan because we had no insurance. But we had a friend whose father owned a mortgage banking house who took over the loan and protected us from foreclosure. He wasn't able to provide the insurance, but he took the calculated risk.

MW: Do you mean that when you decided to sell he bought the mortgage?

Sennett: No, he bought the mortgage shortly after the violence had broken out because about a month after that, the bank that had the mortgage was threatening to foreclose because of the fact that we had no insurance. We had lost our insurance, and they used that as a technical argument. Therefore, we had to either get insurance or we had to buy out the mortgage. So our friendly mortgage company helped us to make that happen. We sold the house and we--

MW: Did you take a loss?

Sennett: We sold the house for \$12,000, but we figured that while we were in there for that year it cost us more than the extra thousand we received over cost. But the house was bought quickly when we decided to sell by a hostile (to us) neighborhood bank. The bankers were friendly to the neighborhood people.

- MW: By "friendly to the neighborhood," do you mean a bank that would not be likely to sell it to blacks or Jews or Communists?
- Sennett: That is correct, and the bank bought the house--there was no private customer for the house--and undertook the responsibility to sell it. After we moved out of the house, we moved into Hyde Park in Chicago.
- MW: What kind of a neighborhood was that?
- Sennett: Hyde Park was a mixed community. It was changing because more blacks were moving in, but at the time, and in the area where I moved into Hyde Park, the majority was white with blacks already in the neighborhood. Hyde Park is the area where the University of Chicago is located and was fairly well integrated. It was a very desirable neighborhood, and we were able to get a nice large flat at a rather reasonable rent. This was possible because some whites were becoming concerned with blacks moving in. The landlord was trying to keep as many whites in the building as possible and undoubtedly gave us preference.
- MW: By this time, all of the press coverage on the incident had died down, I presume, and you weren't notorious figures who would be followed by the press as you moved into a new neighborhood?
- Sennett: No, there was no follow up from Peoria Street once we moved. It certainly was a more comfortable neighborhood for us, where blacks and whites lived together and comingled.

IMPACT ON THE FAMILY

- MW: Bill, just to put the cap on the Peoria Street story, what did this do to your family? Did it leave any lasting scars on the family?
- Sennett: I think it did. I think it left some scars on my children, especially Barbara. Barbara was eight years old and much more impressionable. In talking with Judy, my younger daughter, [it seemed clear that] she hardly remembers. She remembers some crashing of windows about which she had some nightmares. When things had quieted down, there was some fear, particularly expressed by Barbara. I would say Barbara carried some scars over into her later life from that incident.
- MW: How about your wife?

Sennett: My ex-wife is a very fearless kind of woman, a quiet person who kept a lot of things inside herself. Whatever fears or problems were created, she did not show them.

MW: For a full year, for the whole family going in and out of the house past the policeman, knowing that the neighborhood was hostile to you--it must have been really tough for everybody.

Sennett: There was a lot of stress; it was always there. We couldn't relax all the time we were there. Fortunately, my inlaws, Gussie's mother and father, had a country place in Michigan. So we used to take the kids out there quite often in order to be able to unwind.

MW: How come you stood it for a year? Once they set up the police coverage of the house, and built a little house there, didn't you ever have any discussions saying, "This is no way to live. Is it worth it? What are we accomplishing by this? Shouldn't we get out of here? It's bad for the kids." It seems a long time to put up with that.

Sennett: We had some of those discussions with some of our friends and relatives who raised those questions. We, of course, took it into account and talked about it, but we decided--the Bindmans and ourselves--that we now had a political problem on our hands. We felt we could not give in to the mob. We had to help make a breakthrough to lay the basis for an integrated neighborhood. We felt it was necessary to make it possible for blacks and other minorities to be able to walk into that community. We arranged during that period of time--during the year--to have black people visit us. We wanted to let the neighborhood know that they hadn't won anything with their racist fight. We had black friends come in for dinner. We had blacks come to see us during the daytime and, of course, every time they came into the neighborhood, in view of what had happened, we made sure that they were well protected, and they were.

MW: Do you mean they were escorted?

Sennett: They were escorted in, but we wanted to make it visible and the neighbors knew that we welcomed them.

IMPACT ON THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Sennett: Our visitors helped to open the door to the changes that followed. It was not too long thereafter that the neighborhood was eventually integrated.

MW: Did you or the party make an effort to propagandize the neighborhood, leaflet the neighborhood, that sort of thing about this issue?

Sennett: We certainly encouraged it. There was material issued by the Civil Rights Congress and other groups. Nothing directly was put out by the Communist party. There were other supporters who had some contacts, who knew people in the neighborhood, who talked to neighbors. So we found more and more friendly folks as time went on.

Of course, the sympathetic supportive people were not the majority, but there was an important change in attitude visible.

MW: Was the Communist party instrumental in organizing this educational campaign or did the other community groups, the churches and so forth, simply take over?

Sennett: This time it was the broad, non-Communist movement that came to our support and we didn't work out any strategy or try to present it to them. We left it up to them. They knew what to do better than we did.

MW: So to sum up the whole incident, you sort of inadvertently and without planning to do so, broke the ice on the racial issue in that particular neighborhood--

Sennett: I think we did.

MW: --And then stayed to battle it out, with the long-term result that eventually the neighborhood did open up and become in effect an integrated neighborhood?

Sennett: Yes, it took some years, and only after we left, but that did happen eventually. I don't know what kind of neighborhood it is today. One of the problems of integration is that unless it achieves a demographic mix at a certain point, the swing toward change could lead to all whites eventually moving out and the neighborhood becomes all black. We saw that happen in a number of Chicago neighborhoods with the connivance of real estate interests who profit thereby. One of the exceptions to that is the Hyde Park neighborhood in Chicago where the University of Chicago is located. The University of Chicago influence and control of significant property there helped to make possible one of the most integrated of all Chicago communities.

MW: In assessing all of this, the price you and your family had to pay, was it too high a price?

Sennett: We didn't think so at the time and I don't think so in retrospect. It was stressful and caused some scars, but we and the Bindmans felt that we had done something constructive about civil rights and integration in Chicago.

MW: Did you have a lot of support from the Bindmans in the sense that you formed a close, personal tie as a result of this siege?

Sennett: Yes, we did. We were very close friends for years and lost touch only after we moved to California and the Bindmans left Chicago for other parts of the country. ##

UNION ORGANIZING AT THE REQUEST OF MANAGEMENT

MW: We just finished the story of the incidents at the Peoria Street house and you were about to start another story.

Sennett: Yes, I was talking about Hilliard Ellis, a tall, handsome, black union leader, an excellent organizer, and a very keen political mind. The local union which he headed, Local 453 of the UAW-CIO, had about six thousand members in 1950. In addition to being political associates, Hilliard and I had become close friends. One day he got together with me to discuss an unusual phone call and request. He said that a Mr. Frank Strick had made an appointment to see him to inform him that he was the owner of a truck trailer manufacturing company based in Philadelphia and that he was opening a plant in Chicago. He already had started to hire people and was interested in having Local 453 organize a union in the plant that he was about to open. Strick explained that he had what he called a phony union in his Philadelphia plant where he had about five hundred employees and he believed that unions were good for working people but he wanted to have an honest union to represent his workers in Chicago.

The Philadelphia union was the UAW-AFL. This was before the merger with the CIO. Frank Strick told Hilliard that he had been a supporter of Henry Wallace and the Progressive party and he learned through some acquaintance that Local 453 had been a supporter of the Progressive party in the 1948 elections. That's why he decided to contact that local.

Since Strick was already beginning to hire people and he expected to have about 125 workers in the place, Ellis asked me if I had any suggestions about who might be a good person to send in as an inside organizer. I suggested that I might be that person.

Sennett: I had already been transferred into Local 453 of the UAW, and the Communist party, which was paying my salary as a full-time functionary, was tight on money so it seemed to be a good idea if I went to work in the shop for awhile.

I did that from time to time during my party career, when instead of remaining completely on the party payroll, I would take a job, I would earn some money, and then I would go back on the party payroll. I felt that I could handle the auto section, even while I was working on the shop. Hilliard agreed, and I talked it over with the party District Board and it was agreed.

I reported to Frank Strick the following week at the old car barn that he had purchased for the plant on Chicago's south side. Strick introduced me to his 24-year-old son-in-law, Sol Katz, who was later to become the president of the company and to play a major role in launching my executive career in business. Strick asked me to work in the tool crib as a start because he wanted me to help a distant cousin of his working there. Henry Strick, his cousin, was brought to the United States from a concentration camp in Poland. He spoke little English, and my knowledge of Yiddish was of some help to him in the tool crib, as well as improving his knowledge of the English language.

MW: What is a tool crib?

Sennett: A tool crib is a place where all of the major tools are stored and all workers who need those tools have to check them out in the morning for their work and they bring them back to the crib to be checked in at night. This helps to avoid theft and makes it possible to maintain the equipment in good working order.

MW: So what kind of work did you do in there?

Sennett: In the tool crib? I checked the tools in, checked for damage, maintenance and repair needs and had the power tools made ready for use for the next day. The tool crib also provided drill bits (they were constantly being broken) and any other portable equipment that needed to be used in the shop.

Henry Strick had been born in Poland. He had migrated to Sweden after being freed from a Nazi concentration camp, and Frank Strick brought him to this country, gave him a job, and helped him to get his start in the United States. Henry spoke Polish and Yiddish and was very happy to know that he was going to have a Yiddish-speaking assistant working side by side with him.

Sennett: Frank Strick said that being placed in the tool crib was also advantageous for me from the point of view of being able to talk to the men in the plant, so that I could convince them to join the union. After all, I had come to the plant to work and to be the inside organizer for the union.

MW: This is a really strange guy, isn't he? He wants to organize the most militant union he can get in his business. How did he reconcile this with the necessity to show a profit? Did he think about all that? Was he so ideological that he was just committed to the workers or did he think that this was good business?

Sennett: It was a little bit of both. We did get to talk about that one day and he said a boss who related to the workers could improve their conditions, their earnings, and the company's profit as well. He believed people should be well compensated if what they do results in an improved product and greater sales. He said that if a sweeper in the plant, by his work, increased output that was measurable, that person was entitled to more compensation than the average low rates paid to sweepers.

Frank Strick didn't spell out a specific set of proposals to implement his philosophy. He said it was up to the union to make its case for the workers it represented. Obviously Strick was taking contradictory positions. He had not, in practice, sorted out his liberal views from his actual practices.

He was not a left-winger and certainly not a Communist. In his view, liberals, and especially supporters of the Progressive Party, were more sincere people and he could find more conscientious, honest, and hard-working people among them. He believed that most AF of L unions were led by corrupt business agents and that the newer, democratically controlled CIO unions were more truly representative of the interests of their members.

MW: Now, you are a very successful businessman. Was that a wise attitude?

Sennett: Not necessarily; it's contradictory because a boss has to make compromises when dealing with workers in a union. Frank Strick obviously did that. His idea, his reasoning, was the following: There would be a union in his plant whether he wanted it or not. The UAW-AFL auto workers' union in his parent plant was going to try to organize the Chicago facility. He didn't like dealing with them and he was able to bring in a CIO union to preempt the AF of L.

From an employer's point of view, liberalism aside, there could be an advantage to having different unions with the same company. With plants in two different cities, a poor contract in

Sennett: one plant could operate to set a precedent for the other plant. On the other hand, we in local 453 of the UAW-CIO felt that by organizing Strick in Chicago we could set the standards to benefit the workers of the Philadelphia facility as well.

MW: How did you go about organizing the plant?

Sennett: I was able to recommend the hiring of several other union people so that we could organize the union in the shortest period of time. By working in the tool crib I was able to get to know all the workers as they had to check in and check out their power tools daily. Frank Strick asked me to be careful about "talking union" to the people during working hours. He said that the plant general manager and the general foreman were both anti-union and it would be better if I could avoid an open confrontation with them.

One day I got into a discussion about the union while in the men's washroom, and the general foreman walked in and ordered us to break it up. He reported it to Strick, who prevailed upon him simply to warn me to stop soliciting union memberships during working hours.

We went through the process of gathering union members by getting them to sign union cards and preparing for a labor board election. Frank Strick said that he wasn't just going to recognize the union automatically. He wanted us to convince the workers to join of their own free will and he wanted us to get certification by the National Labor Relations Board. To do that, we, of course, had to petition for an election by getting a legally required number of workers to sign cards to the effect that they wanted our union to represent them. We did that and we went through the process of holding a labor board election. We won the necessary majority and were then certified as the bargaining agent of the Strick Chicago plant.

Strick told me, before we went into the bargaining sessions for the purpose of drawing up a contract, that he wasn't going to be a patsy. Just because he was friendly to the union, he said, didn't mean he would "give away the store." He suggested that we temper our demands and if possible make them consistent with some of the working conditions that they had at the Philadelphia plant.

Hilliard Ellis and I read the Philadelphia contract and we didn't like a good part of it so we drew up our own contract proposals for submission to the membership. After other revisions we elected a bargaining committee and undertook contract negotiations with Strick, Katz, and the plant manager representing the company. True to his word, Frank Strick was a tough bargainer

Sennett: and he certainly gave us a hard time, a much harder time at the bargaining table than he did in making it possible for us to enter the plant.

MW: This guy was a real fox, wasn't he?

Sennett: Oh, he certainly was. But we got some modest pay increases and we improved on certain working conditions and fringe benefits as compared with the AF of L contract in the Philadelphia plant. When the Philadelphia contract was up for renewal they were able to incorporate some of the conditions we had won in Chicago. Of course, Strick knew that that was going to happen and that is one of the reasons why he was so careful about his bargaining position with us in Chicago.

MW: Did Strick know you were a Communist?

Sennett: He may have suspected. But he certainly learned that from the FBI. When I presented myself to Strick, I did so as a member of the union and a Wallace supporter. He was visited by the FBI and, as is their practice, they let employers know that the person in their employ is or may be a Communist. During the McCarthy period that was a scare signal to get rid of that employee. At least Frank Strick gave me job protection. He was opposed to such practices by the FBI, the police, or any government body.

MW: Why was he a Wallace supporter?

Sennett: I never really got to know the inner Frank Strick. He was a liberal and believed that Henry Wallace was a strong supporter of the policies of Franklin Roosevelt. He felt that Wallace would put an end to the cold war instituted by Harry Truman. Apparently Strick was already ill with cancer when I met him, as he died shortly after I left the company in 1952.

MW: How old was he when you met him?

THE AMERICAN PEACE CRUSADE

Sennett: I think he was then about fifty-four or fifty-five years old. After working in the plant for a little over six months, the party asked me to take some time out to assist the American Peace Crusade, which was organizing a national peace conference in Chicago. It seems they needed a coordinator who was familiar with Chicago who could help to set the conference in motion organizationally.

MW: Now, was this the Stockholm Peace Appeal?

Sennett: No. This was a separate action during the period of the Korean War.

MW: The American Peace Crusade--was that a Communist front organization?

Sennett: It was what was called a front organization by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, Senator McCarthy and the redbaiters of that period. Communists were among its most active members and supporters but the overwhelming number of its adherents were not Communists. I felt that the peace conference was an important event and told Mr. Strick that I would have to leave the plant. He suggested that it was not necessary for me to quit my job. He would like to see me continue even though the union was already organized, and he suggested that I take a leave of absence for the period needed.

MW: Do you remember the date of this?

Sennett: The date when I was needed by the Peace Crusade was sometime in April.

MW: In what year?

Sennett: In 1951. It was a three-day conference, June 29 to July 1. The conference was called the American People's Congress and Exposition for Peace. There were about five thousand delegates in attendance.

MW: So that was roughly a year after the Korean War had started?

Sennett: That's right. The issue of peace in Korea was foremost on the agenda. I worked with the American Peace Crusade for that period and Mr. Strick made a large financial contribution to the work of the crusade which he gave to me to contribute in his behalf.

I did take a leave of absence for three months and I promised Strick that I would return to work when the conference ended. I liked the experience in the plant. It was a lot of fun organizing a union with a boss who was a progressive-minded person and knew exactly where I stood.

MW: Your job there was not an especially interesting job, was it? What made it interesting was the union organizing?

Sennett: Correct. After the contract period, I was the chairman of that unit and the chief negotiator in dealing with shop grievances.

MW: Do you mean the union unit?

Sennett: Yes, the union unit. Local 453 was an amalgamated local with some sixteen plants in its jurisdiction.

MW: Your main function in that plant then was as Mr. Union, right?

Sennett: That is correct, not as Mr. Communist.

MW: But your importance to Strick was not that you were checking tools in and out. It was what you were doing relative to the union.

Sennett: No, in addition I earned my pay in the job to which I was assigned. If I was not there, they would have had to hire somebody else to work in the tool crib with Henry Strick. But as it was, I did that job.

RETURN TO THE STRICK COMPANY

Sennett: When I returned after my leave of absence I became the plant expeditor.

MW: Yes, but before that--

Sennett: Before that I began to do some of the expediting work. In other words, I would also see to it that parts and fasteners for the various stations or departments were provided for the various stages of trailer construction.

MW: [It was] almost kind of a foreman's role then.

Sennett: No, it was not. I didn't supervise anybody and there were foremen in each department. I would be called upon by them to see that the materials, in the quantities needed, were at each job station where and when needed. The foreman would assign the laborers to do the physical moving. On my return from leave of absence Frank Strick suggested that I move in to the front office to work with the purchasing agent. I refused because that was not the union's jurisdiction. The job as an expeditor was then created, under union jurisdiction, to fulfill a necessary plant function. It was an essential job as the volume of orders for trailers grew, and I did it under the direction of the plant's general foreman.

- MW: What I am trying to get at here is that it sounds a little bit to me as if what Frank Strick managed to create was a sweetheart union that you were running for him.
- Sennett: Well, it wasn't a sweetheart union in the sense that it was giving in to Frank Strick's demands because we improved the conditions of the workers even as compared with the workers in the Philadelphia plant. We were able to get some increases that were initially higher than the comparable rates being paid in Philadelphia. We were also able to improve certain working conditions in the plant which were an improvement over what his union had in Philadelphia and we truly represented the interests of the workers in the plant. There was actually an adversary relationship that developed over grievances and demands while Strick was alive. After his death, when I had left the plant, the union had to deal with local plant management and the relationship between union and management was certainly more strained.
- MW: But while you were there, you wouldn't have characterized it as an adversary relationship?
- Sennett: It was adversary in the sense that unions are in an adversary relationship with management. Management wants to limit improvements in working conditions and to keep down any increases in wages, and the union wants to improve working conditions and win as much in wage increases and other benefits as it possibly can. In that sense, it's an adversary relationship. But if you are talking about it with respect to the attitude between this union and this company, it was a lot more friendly than many other union-management relationships.
- MW: How does that fit into your general ideology about this? The American [union-management] model is that, while it can be civil, it is not necessarily friendly and that it is an adversary relationship with hard and tough bargaining on both sides. It is not the codirection model that is coming out of Europe now. That was not a common idea at that time, that the workers and management have a common interest and they have to get together to solve the problems so that they can increase productivity, and everybody benefits. What we had at that time, following all of the labor strife of the 30s, was the notion that in the shop, the boss was the boss and the union was the union.
- Sennett: I considered that this was an isolated event and obviously it was unusual. It was somewhat humorous. But one can't draw any political conclusions about capitalism from the way in which the Strick plant in Chicago was organized. The boss was still the boss, the union was still the union, and profit was still one-sidedly the company's domain.

Sennett: I knew other owners of businesses, smaller businesses in the main, and I knew that they had people working for them and some people like that were members of the party. I discovered that you could not be a true blue Communist and be a boss at the same time. One had to make compromises because in a system of private ownership there could be no economic democracy, no true equality whether one was a friendly or even a "fair" boss.

MW: Do you mean they compromised their own managerial position?

Sennett: No, I think they compromised their own working class outlook. They would--

MW: You said "the bosses." You are talking now about--

Sennett: I am talking about Communist bosses. I think that all the Communist bosses I knew essentially exploited their workers. They would not admit to that. They considered themselves good bosses and they considered that they were different than the ordinary boss and the party tolerated that so long as they hewed to the party's political line. I didn't make a big deal about that relationship at Strick because I thought it was simply an exceptional situation.

MW: It was, however, a very important turning point in your life because it was your entré into the capitalistic world in a sense.

Sennett: Oh, it certainly was. I didn't realize it at that time.

MW: That's just what I was going to ask you. Did this experience cause you to reflect on your beliefs at all at that time?

Sennett: Not at all. It added to my experience and knowledge and probably contributed to a less rigid attitude about the workings of the capitalist system. But shortly thereafter I gave up my job at Strick to return to full-time party work. And Frank Strick again offered me an opportunity to take a position on the management staff.

MW: Very interesting.

Sennett: I learned a lot by being the plant expeditor because I did have to deal with the plant purchasing agent and in effect became his assistant. I learned a lot about trailer specifications, the purchase of parts, the cost of parts, and trailer construction as a whole.

- MW: The peace conference you worked for was simply an interlude in your life? Did it have no really great significance one way or the other?
- Sennett: No, it did not. I simply took that on because there was a need for someone with my background and knowledge of local people. It was deemed necessary that I do that job because of my organizational experience and my knowledge of the Chicago scene.
- MW: Now, this was a pretty good period of your life, wasn't it? After you moved out of the Peoria Street house, you moved into a compatible neighborhood and so home life presumably was a lot less tense and better. You got into an extremely interesting job with an interesting boss.
- Sennett: I certainly did, but you must remember that all the time that I worked in the Strick plant, I was still the section organizer of the auto section and I had to deal with the auto branches, the section committee, and the work and assignments that had to be carried on there in addition to union work.

IX The Cold War Period and the Party Underground

[Interview 9: February 26, 1982]##

FBI BREAK-INS CONFIRMED

MW: How do you want to begin discussing the period of the cold war?

Sennett: About two years ago [1980] I was visited by a retired FBI agent, Wesley Swearingen, who said he was writing a book about his own experiences in Chicago in the 50s and 60s. He said that he was assigned to the "black bag" detail and had entered my home illegally about a dozen times from 1954 to 1956.

MW: Was he apologetic about this?

Sennett: He hadn't come to apologize. He said that in later years he realized that some of the actions he took, under orders, were unlawful. He was now writing his memoirs and wanted to cross-check some information with me.

MW: It seems like a lot of crust for a guy to come up to you and say, "I burglarized your home on a number of occasions and now I would like you to help me gather some information to write a book."

Sennett: That's essentially what Rosalie Ross (the woman with whom I live) said. Swearingen was brought to our home by a young man whom I recognized as a former correspondent for the Bay Guardian. He had been hired to ghost write Swearingen's book. And when he called me to set up the appointment he stated that the ex-agent was anxious to expose the misdeeds of the FBI. Rosalie asked Swearingen when he got "religion" and why he waited until he retired before he gave up illegal break-ins.

MW: How did he react to that?

Sennett: He acted somewhat embarrassed and had no comment.

MW: Did it cross your mind that maybe he wasn't really retired or that he was retired, but was still on assignment?

Sennett: I might have thought so but he showed me a story in the New York Times, proving that he had testified before a congressional committee in 1979 as a witness to illegal actions taken by the FBI in the past. Swearingen claimed that he personally had participated in over three hundred "black bag" jobs in Chicago from 1952 to 1963. There was nothing I had to say that was going to be detrimental to anybody but the FBI. And I was certainly willing to buttress a case against continuation of illegal actions conducted by that agency. My view is that evidence that helps to expose some of the nefarious practices of the FBI is positive and helpful.

MW: Has the book come out?

Sennett: No, I haven't seen the book. I haven't heard from Swearingen since nor do I know the whereabouts of his ghost writer.

MW: You can't remember his name?

Sennett: No, I can't.

MW: What was the FBI searching for?

Sennett: Swearingen said they were looking for information about the Communist party and specifically for leads to the whereabouts of Gil Green and Fred Fine, two Communist leaders who were in hiding. Gil had been sentenced to prison under the Smith Act, and Fred had been indicted and refused to show up for trial.

MW: Did the ex-FBI agent indicate that he had made any effort to secure documents that he might have produced at that time through the Freedom of Information Act?

Sennett: No, he did not.

MW: Did you have any documents? You have your FBI file.

Sennett: I have some files provided me under the Freedom of Information Act. Of course, it's incomplete, but of the documents that I have there was no reference whatsoever to those "black bag" jobs. Most of the copies of files sent are censored. About one half of the FBI reports are inked out. Probably the most relevant passages have been obliterated or have not been sent.

MW: Have you been over those documents on the basis of what you discussed with Swearingen to determine whether those documents contained materials that might have been purloined from your house?

Sennett: No, I did not.

MW: It would be an interesting analysis to make.

Sennett: Yes, it might be. I have over 1,500 pages and a lot of it is quite repetitious and irrelevant. Additionally, about 600 more pages were held back. At least the files helped me to remember dates, places, and some events. In any case, I asked Swearingen how he got into my house. He said they brought a locksmith to make an impression so that they could make duplicate keys.

MW: Make an impression of--

Sennett: An impression of the lock so that they could make the key.

MW: Did he indicate how many times he had gone into your home surreptitiously?

Sennett: Yes, he said he made about twelve entries into my house over the period of about one and a half years.

MW: Did you ever have any impression at the time that anyone had been in your house?

Sennett: No, not at all.

MW: Did you have anything in the house that might have been useful to him?

Sennett: No, I don't think so. I had many papers, articles I was writing, statements, copies of letters, and so forth. I kept many things that were public information, like pamphlets and books. But there were no secret minutes or membership lists. And there was no information on the whereabouts as to Gil Green or Fred Fine because I didn't know.

MW: At the time, were you alert to the possibility that there might be surreptitious entries into your house?

Sennett: Yes, I thought that could happen.

MW: Did you have any devices that might give away whether someone had been in or around the house?

Sennett: No, I didn't do that. But Gussie and I would periodically look through the drawers to see whether certain papers were missing and they did not appear to be. Swearingen said they were very cautious and put everything back as carefully as they possibly could.

MW: Did he do this alone or did he have someone with him?

Sennett: There generally were two inside the house. They were ready to photograph what they needed. And they would have lookouts on the outside. He told me, for example, that my two children, who were in grammar school, were followed to school whenever the agents would enter the house. They wanted to make certain that the children would not be going home during the day while agents were inside the house. My daughter Judy was about seven at the time and Barbara about fourteen. Swearingen said he once bawled out a fellow agent he saw at the schoolyard trying to locate Judy in the crowd of kids at the school playground. The kids were going back into the classroom and the agent hovered over them looking like a child snatcher.

MW: Did they photograph documents?

Sennett: Yes, they did. They would photograph some letters and statements. The ex-agent didn't recall exactly what they were about but he believed they were of no real significance.

MW: So this was a team.

Sennett: It was a team.

MW: Which consisted of at least three people.

Sennett: Sometimes there were more than three. In 1955 we moved from Hyde Park to a small house in Chicago's Albany Park district. The landlord and landlady lived in a house almost directly across the street. The FBI enlisted their support as informants and they were reporting on the goings and comings of people who visited us. Swearingen told me that agents would sit in the landlord's living room often to maintain a more "discreet" surveillance of our house.

MW: I presume the owners of the house did this out of a sense of patriotism.

Sennett: I think so. They were very cool to us and sounded hostile on occasion. There was no apparent reason as we paid our rent on time, we were not rowdy, and we kept the house in order. We attempted to break the ice with them but they kept their distance. Apparently the FBI had advised them not to show any friendliness.

MW: On the other hand, they would probably never throw you out because the FBI wanted to keep you there so you could be observed!
[laughs]

Sennett: You're right. They didn't try to evict us.

MW: Do you know how large the FBI staff in Chicago was?

Sennett: Swearingen told me they had about 250 agents exclusive of informants. He didn't know the number involved.

MW: That was a very expensive proposition, watching you, wasn't it.

Sennett: With approximately upwards of 50 percent of the Chicago office assigned to watching Communists and other "subversives" there were limited resources for hunting down real criminals.

MW: This was in the 50s?

Sennett: Yes, this was in the 50s. As a consequence of the McCarthyite hysteria about communism, the FBI was able to greatly enlarge its staff each year. But the number of agents working on criminal activities was continuing to decline. In New York, for example, according to Peter Maas who wrote The Valachi Papers, there were "upwards of four hundred agents [who] were occupied in foiling domestic Communists," but only four FBI agents were assigned to combatting organized crime!

MW: If it's correct that you didn't keep anything of any real significance in your house, then they spent an awful lot of money for nothing, didn't they?

Sennett: Absolutely. There is no question about that.

MW: Yet they kept coming back and photographing. What did they photograph?

Sennett: Well, there's a lot of nonessential material they came across and they put it all in their raw files. I assume that if there was a name of a person who wrote to me or a relative that communicated with me or sent me a letter that they would have those people investigated. I remember when I was in the U.S. Army Air Corps, that anybody who got in touch with me, very innocent people from the point of view of radicalism, they would be investigated.

J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI, was riding high during the cold war period, and organized crime obviously took a back seat to anticommunism. This was the period when the fear of Communist expansion with Soviet support led to hysterical foreign

and domestic policies. These resulted in the Korean War, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, loyalty oaths, deportations, blacklisting, the imprisonment of dissenters, antilabor laws, laws abridging civil liberties, and a growing terror against blacks who were demanding their civil rights. A lot of this stuff has come out of the FBI files. This was the era of McCarthyism when the Senator from Wisconsin was able to make political capital out of the paranoid fear of the Communist menace, which afflicted millions of Americans.

In this atmosphere of the cold war, with many of its leaders indicted and soon to be imprisoned with the onset of the Korean War, the Communist party warned of the danger of fascism in America. Taking its own reasoning very seriously, the Communist party worked to set up a limited organizational structure which would function underground to prepare itself for the time when the party would be outlawed by government decree.

THE OPERATIVE BUT UNAVAILABLE CADRE

Sennett: One day in the fall of 1951, when I was still working for the Strick Corporation, I received a message from Ed Starr, who had been the organizational secretary of the Illinois district. He wanted to meet me somewhere in the Chicago suburbs. I hadn't seen Ed in a long time. I knew he was away on a special assignment and I suspected that he was doing some groundwork in preparation for the underground apparatus. Mollie West had taken his place as organization secretary.

When I met with Ed, he informed me of the decision by the national board of the Communist party to set up what they called an "operative but unavailable" cadre, which would consist of an "unavailable" district leadership as constituted by the Illinois District Board. The concept was to have the community and industrial sections, those bodies which coordinated the branchess or units--remaining in the open. The unavailable but operative board would find some way to maintain links with them while at the same time hopefully being unobserved.

MW: You say "operative but unavailable board" or "cadre." What do you mean.

Sennett: The "unavailable cadre" included all of those in the underground. The board was composed of a more limited number of those cadre.

MW: Would you call it a parallel structure or a parallel party? It wasn't a completely parallel apparatus?

Sennett: No, because the open board became transformed into the unavailable board. In other words, the individuals who were members except for those with whom they had been assigned to contact or work.

MW: Did the idea develop in this country or was it an idea that came from abroad?

Sennett: The concept was developed in this country. I don't know of any parallels from abroad. We adopted a method of operation in anticipation that we would be made illegal. The opportunity to remain in the open still existed, but the national committee and our board believed that we would be forced into illegality, and therefore we were taking steps to prepare ourselves to function under repressive conditions.

MW: Okay, but to your knowledge, no one from abroad gave instructions to the American party to set up this underground apparatus?

Sennett: To my knowledge, that was not the case at all.

MW: Maybe it's premature to ask this, but I'll ask it now anyway. The Russians had had an enormous amount of experience with underground apparatuses in the Soviet Union and after the revolution outside, and they are experts in underground activities. Did they give training to any Americans in how to do this, how to avoid surveillance and all those kinds of techniques, either by taking them to the Soviet Union and training them or by sending people over to give you advice on how to do this?

Sennett: I do not know of any "orders," suggestions, or training by the Russians. There were American Communists who visited the Soviet Union, attended some meetings or conferences as fraternal representatives or observers. Some had studied at the Lenin School in the 20s and 30s. It has been alleged that underground operations were taught then. I have no knowledge of this and I know of no person with whom I was in contact in the Communist party who based our underground operation on Russian experiences or Russian advice.

MW: I guess that if they had had that experience, they probably would have been instructed not to talk to other people about it. The fewer people who knew it, the better.

- Sennett: That's probably true, but America is such a different country. Political conditions were so different from prerevolutionary Russia that the decision to go underground in the United States could not possibly have been nurtured by the study of Soviet history.
- MW: Do you remember whether Morris and Jack Childs would have known about the underground apparatus? They were recently accused of having possibly been double agents for the United States and the Soviet Union.
- Sennett: To my knowledge, Morris Childs was not in Chicago during the underground period. I do not think he was in touch with the people who were preparing the underground apparatus. But he probably knew about it.
- MW: Morris Childs went through a period of inactivity from 1947, when he was dropped as editor of the Daily Worker (I think that date is correct). According to a book recently published, he was recruited by the FBI as an informer sometime around the mid-50s. I don't know where he came back into action, but he originally had been in Chicago, right?
- Sennett: He had originally been in Chicago and had been the district organizer of the Communist Party in Illinois. He suffered a heart attack in the late 40s and he lived in Florida for a time. I did not know Jack Childs, who lived in New York, but I met Morris again when we established the open Illinois board in late 1954. He was living in Chicago again and took on some limited assignments with our board. He probably was a courier to the Soviet Union as I learned that he made a number of trips there in the 60s and 70s. If he was an informer for the FBI, he also appears to have been an agent for the Soviet Union.
- MW: How was your underground apparatus structured?
- Sennett: Ed Starr and Irving Herman started putting some things in place in 1950. They arranged for some people to move out of town, change their names, and get new jobs. They set up places for meetings, arranged for "safe houses"—
- MW: Did they use that term "safe house" then?
- Sennett: No. I am using it as it had been used by the New Left in the 60s.
- MW: The CIA uses it, too.
- Sennett: Yes.
- MW: But I wondered if that was a term that was current then?

Sennett: No, it was not.

MW: Was there a term then?

Sennett: "Secure" or "clean" houses is what I think we called them. Ed said that it had been suggested by the board that I leave my job at Strick, that I give up my work as the section organizer of the auto section, which I had still maintained, and that I come into the OBU [operational but unavilable] as the oganizational secretary. Ed would work with me in order to complete setting up the apparatus in the district, putting people into place for the jobs that had to be done, and helping to get more people to go into industry who could take on other assignments. Additionally, we would help certain comrades secure couriers, if needed, and oversee the security measures being carried out by the entire underground apparatus.

MW: Was the existence of the OBU known to party people who were not in the OBU?

Sennett: Pretty generally. We didn't talk about it, but it was kind of an "in" joke and when we met with people in the open it was pretty obvious that we wanted to meet with them under secure conditions. They therefore had to "clean" themselves--that is, make certain there were no FBI tails following them. And of course we would do the same. In the process, obviously, they understood that we were not living at home and that there was an OBU.

MW: This term "OBU" was known? If you had gone to an average Communist in Chicago and mentioned OBU, would he have known what you were talking about?

Sennett: It was pretty much generally known.

MW: When you say that you had these meetings and you had to "clean" yourselves, do you mean by that take circuitous routes to the meetings so that you could check to see if you were being followed?

Sennett: Circuitous routes, switching cars, public transportation, and so forth.

MW: Was there training in that?

Sennett: Unfortunately, there was no training. That was one of the things that perhaps made it so evident to the FBI, as we learned later. Every person was given some elementary indoctrination. We would deal with the use of other names, transportation, living quarters, couriers, dress, how to "clean" your movements, use of phone, and

liaisons with family. But there were no set classes, and it was left up to the individual to carry out and "police" his or her own program.

MW: And you were amateurs at this yourselves.

Sennett: We certainly were.

MW: You really didn't know what you were doing, in fact?

Sennett: We knew a little and we learned we needed to do a better job in setting up meetings and contacts with people, in the way we moved around the city. We needed better, more carefully trained couriers and better security in homes where we lived and where meetings were held.

MW: Didn't it occur to you that you were amateurs and that maybe you needed to seek some professional help?

Sennett: I don't know where we could have gone to get it. We knew we needed to improve the operation and we told ourselves that we could do this through further experience, greater vigilance, and tighter discipline. In the meantime, we were grappling with the problem of increased surveillance by the FBI.

MW: So your apparatus was known to the FBI virtually from the beginning.

Sennett: They knew about the apparatus but not necessarily about everybody that was part of it or where every "unavailable" was staying. We used to discuss our security measures quite often in order to eliminate sloppy methods and bad habits. But the fundamental weakness was built into the concept of an "unavailable" underground trying to deal with and give leadership to a party membership that was out in the open.

MW: The FBI probably knew where you all were, more or less, so that if they wanted to swoop down and pick you all up, they could have done so?

Sennett: Yes, that was pretty much the way it was. An incident occurred shortly thereafter to prove that point to us.

MW: When you went into the OBU, you left the house that the FBI had been burglarizing?

Sennett: No. That happened only after I left the unavailable apparatus and returned home. This was in 1954. The period that I refer to was the years of 1951 to 53. I was responsible to the board for

contact with the section organizers--those were our links to the whole party membership--with the party treasurer and in the followup on administrative and organizational decisions growing out of party policies decided on by the board. It appeared to me in late 1951 that the party's estimate of the danger of fascism was indeed correct and that a protective apparatus was an important and necessary move. I was convinced of that.

MW: How do you feel about that now?

Sennett: From everything I learned, it was a futile effort and it diverted us from dealing with the main problems that faced us in the open. I thought that it was necessary to build an underground apparatus in order to prepare for anticipated illegality, but the ingredients to make the transition were not there. We could not make it work.

MW: What I meant really was, how do you feel about your analysis of the inevitability of fascism? Obviously, you were mistaken, but do you have any notion about why you were mistaken?

Sennett: I think we overestimated the danger of fascism.

MW: Why did you overestimate it?

Sennett: I indicated earlier that the repression and hysteria had grown in our country. Our [Communist party] leaders were being thrown in jail, and a number of state legislatures and Congress itself were moving to illegalize the Communist party. The three branches of government were moving separately and together to provide the legal framework for the abrogation of civil liberties for Communists and thousands of non-Communists who were labeled as "subversives." With the onset of the Korean War we believed there was a real danger of a new world war.

MW: Being a target group of all of this surveillance one would obviously have that feeling much more strongly than the ordinary citizen who was not involved in radical politics.

Sennett: We were certainly being prosecuted, persecuted, and felt besieged on many fronts.

MW: As far as you party people were concerned, you were living in a Fascist state, I guess.

Sennett: Pretty close to it. We made an estimate that the entire country faced the danger of a Fascist takeover from within the government. Under the Smith Act, for example, eleven Communist leaders had already been sentenced to prison for up to five years in 1950 and

another sixty had been indicted in 1951. The charge was conspiring to teach and advocate the overthrow of the U.S. government by force and violence. In 1950, with the passage of the McCarran Act, despite the veto of President Truman, all officers and members of the Communist party were required to register as well as were so-called Communist front organizations deemed by Congress or by the Justice Department to be subversive. Those who would register, if they did, were then under this act to be interned in concentration camps if the United States was invaded or if war was declared.

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Sennett: In addition to the federal efforts to make the Communist party illegal and to restrict civil liberties in the country, there were some states already with sedition laws of their own. Steve Nelson, for example, a well-known Communist leader, was the party's organizer in western Pennsylvania in the early 50s. He was indicted under the Smith Act, the federal law, and also his state's sedition law. In 1952, he was sentenced to five years in prison under the former, the federal law, and in 1953, he was sentenced to twenty more years under the state law.

MW: How much time did he actually serve?

Sennett: He actually served a total of about a year in prison because eventually these laws were contested and found to be unconstitutional.

GOING UNDERGROUND

Sennett: Impressed with the need to help the party to survive, against the onslaughts of a repressive government, I discussed these matters with my wife, Gussie. I told her of my meeting with Ed, the basis for the proposals that were being made, and the importance of my role in undertaking this new assignment in the underground. We talked about the kids, how they would feel about my absence, how we might arrange to get together away from Chicago and under what circumstances and so on. I'm not sure that Gussie agreed with the rationale for the underground apparatus, but party loyalty influenced her as it had in the past to acquiesce in this decision.

MW: Did you approach this with a sense of adventure?

Sennett: There was some sense of adventure about it. In some ways it was another kind of adventure along the lines of my service in Spain. But there was also a greater feeling of foreboding on my part about the growth of the Fascist danger in America and the fact that we might very soon be entirely illegal. I also felt that I would probably end up going to prison.

There was a special summer membership registration campaign of the party in 1951. In this registration, many people were asked whether they wanted to continue their membership. There was, in essence, a weeding out of people who were considered weak in their dedication to the party. A number of people did not register because of fear, doubt, or passivity. In past years when members didn't register, they were still kept on the books and efforts were made to bring them back in later in the year or the following year. But this time, large numbers of members dropped out or were dropped from the rolls. By the end of the registration period in 1951, the Illinois district had dropped to approximately thirteen hundred members. It had been three thousand in 1948.

The operative but unavailable cadre in Illinois numbered about fifty people. The Illinois District Board was headed by Claude Lightfoot, who was known as the executive secretary.

MW: This is the underground board?

Sennett: There was only one board then. It was the unavailable board.

MW: There was not an open, available board?

Sennett: No, there was not.

MW: So really the head of the party in Illinois was underground.

Sennett: That's right.

MW: If anybody wanted to go talk to the party leadership of the Communist party in Illinois, they couldn't do that because they were underground.

Sennett: They were unreachable. There would have to be special arrangements made. A request would be made and then a decision would have to be made whether a particular party leader would meet with a person or persons on request.

MW: Suppose somebody in the press wanted to get the official Illinois party position on someone. Could they find somebody to talk to?

"UNAVAILABLE" PARTY LEADERSHIP IN ILLINOIS

Sennett: Not from among the unavailable leadership. But there might be some people out in the open who would see the press. Claude Lightfoot was one of the leading black Communists in the country. His wife, Geraldine, was also a member of the board. There were a total of eleven board members. These included Ed Starr; Sam Kushner, who was our trade union secretary (a former trade union organizer); Ray Tillman, section organizer of the south side (which encompassed the most populous black community); Frank Mucci, who was our downstate organizer; Alfred ("Wag") Wagenknecht, who worked with national groups; Yolanda Hall; Mollie West; and myself.

The board would generally meet about every other week for full-day sessions. Other party members, either from the unavailable group or those who worked in the open, would be invited to attend sessions bearing on their work or for specific policy discussions.

Between board meetings, Claude, Ed, Sam, and I would meet as a board committee to follow up on decisions, plan the agendas for future board meetings, or we would deal with special matters in the interim.

Among the other unavailables were people who were not on the board, but they changed their jobs, took on assumed names, and would generally live and work outside of the city. These people had special party assignments, either heading up committees or taking on some special projects. Some would be couriers for other party leaders.

Ed Starr, who was the pioneer in setting up our apparatus in Chicago, also set up a small printing operation, if it became necessary to use that equipment. Sy Gordon, a Chicago artist, was in charge of that. He had rented an apartment with a basement to put the equipment into place for use as needed. Sy was well versed in duplication processes and had purchased a variety of usable used equipment to set type and run small jobs to handle protected emergency printing work.

MW: What do you mean "protected emergency printing work"?

Sennett: We still had most of the party out in the open, and there were certain leaflets or certain materials that could still be printed by printers in the open. But if there were some special policy

statements or newsletters that we wanted to circulate among our own membership, it could be done by the printing equipment owned by the unavailable apparatus.

David Englestein, our long-time educational director, continued in that function though he was part of the unavailable apparatus and had a full-time job working in a machine shop during the day. He had to do a lot of traveling to be living outside of Chicago and attend to his party duties after working hours.

Mollie West, who had been the organizational secretary in the open after Ed Starr left that job, succeeded Ed Starr. She was married to another party functionary named Jim West, who had taken an assignment working with the Ohio district unavailable apparatus. She and Jim had taken steps to adopt a baby some time before the setting up of the unavailable apparatus. However, the delivery of that child came about just about the same time that Mollie and Jim were joining the OBU. The arrival of the baby did not deter Mollie from her determination to enter our nether world. Though she could not take on a specific assignment initially, she brought along her son, Stevie, who had the distinction of being the youngest member of the Communist party's underground.

MW: This was the new baby?

Sennett: Yes, the new baby. Ed Starr and I had to arrange to settle Mollie in a home with an interracial couple who lived in the suburbs. We had to get a crib for the baby, and we puzzled over the security of that whole arrangement. The husband of the couple Mollie was staying with was also a member of the Auto Section Committee out in the open. This had to be a temporary place for Mollie as it was obviously a poor security setup.

MW: That was incredibly bad security, wasn't it?

Sennett: There was more. Frank Mucci, a former coal miner and a board member, lived with his wife, Lois, as part of our apparatus. Not long thereafter, he was found to have a malignant cancer which was terminal. When he was first hospitalized under an assumed name, we suggested that he and Lois go out into the open and search for the best medical care that Frank could possibly get. They both rejected that option on the grounds that they would be exposed "to the enemy" and preferred the "security" of the underground. Our treasurer, Leon Katzen, dedicated himself to Frank's medical needs and to his and Lois's personal problems through every stage of Frank's illness until Frank's death.

Katzen was a remarkably effective functionary, though somewhat long-winded at meetings and in personal discussions. One day I

decided to talk to Leon about that because I felt that he prolonged meetings unnecessarily. When we got together for our talk, Leon asked me to cite chapter and verbosity as examples. I couldn't remember all of the incidents and all of the things he had said or proposed in the past, but I tried to reconstruct examples. After a long and exhausting personal session through the night and into the early hours of the morning, he wore me down and I failed to make my case to his satisfaction.

Leon had wide contact among the professional and business people who were either members of the Communist party or sympathizers. He was an excellent fund raiser and an effective political coordinator in rallying support for the policies of the party. He spent a lot of time getting to know people and helping to motivate them.

FUND RAISING DURING THE UNDERGROUND PERIOD

Sennett: In the 1951-52 period, the Illinois District of the Communist party raised approximately \$200,000 through contributions for its work for the national committee, for the support of the Daily Worker and the needs of our state organization.

MW: Now, all that had to be raised by the above-ground people, didn't it?

Sennett: Yes, it had to be raised by contact with the above-ground people and by involving them in raising money as well. This was a tremendous sum for us in those days. It's even a large sum in these days. While the entire party organization was geared to raise funds in those years, Leon played a key role, particularly in getting large-sum contributions. I know that he convinced some people to sell jewelry or other assets or to dip into their savings to help the party.

MW: The book on the FBI and Martin Luther King published recently states that Morris Childs personally brought a million dollars from the Soviet Union to the American Communist party in about this period. Did you ever hear of anything like that or did you ever have any impression that any of this money was coming from abroad?

Sennett: I didn't see Morris Childs until I came back out into the open. He did not have any contact with the unavailable apparatus to my knowledge. I saw no evidence of any money coming into our district other than the money that we raised. I knew from Leon's

reports and records what sums of money came in, how much we had and how much we were spending.

The party desperately needed large sums of money. Over and above what was required for its organizational and political activities and the staff, there were the Smith Act trials, the support of our press subsidies to literature and to some people who had gone into the deep freeze.* It was estimated that the Communist party raised several million dollars nationally in the years of 1949 through 1954.

MW: Let me stop you there for a second. You say it was estimated; who estimated that?

Sennett: This was estimated by a few of us from several districts who were privy to knowing something about the party's fund-raising goals and results. I never saw a national budget or financial statement but the figure was an educated guess based on partial information for certain costs of those years.

MW: Did you ever have the feeling then that the party ought to be seeking help from overseas?

Sennett: No, I did not.

MW: Did anybody? Was there any discussion about it?

Sennett: There was never any discussion in my presence.

MW: Doesn't that seem kind of odd? After all, you have international proletarian solidarity and you are in trouble. Why not seek help from overseas?

Sennett: I remember some conversations where we joked about how nice it would be to get help from abroad. However, such matters never came up for serious discussions at my level. If someone had done so, that person would probably have been suspected of being naive

* That is, they left their homes and had no contact with the open organization or the underground.

or an FBI agent. Party comrades were generally very discreet about where or with whom matters like "money from Moscow" were discussed.

MW: The impression I get is that within the party, among knowledgeable people, there were certain kinds of subjects that were taboo to discuss. You just didn't discuss them because it was sort of like Puritans discussing sex--you know it's there, but you don't talk about it.

Sennett: That's very true. That situation did exist to a large extent. It existed even, let's say, when people went into the underground or to the unavailable category. If you didn't see the person, you didn't ask about the person. We tried to get the open party leadership of the sections and in the the clubs to understand that. There were certain things you didn't pursue (and we used the word "security") for security reasons.

MW: So is it possible that at that time people may have thought that there was foreign assistance but didn't talk about it or didn't ask about it or try to confirm it, but in the back of their minds may have suspected some of these millions of dollars might have been coming from abroad or some other kinds of assistance might have been coming from abroad?

Sennett: Publicly we denied that and personally I never knew of any.

MW: But did you suspect it or think it might be?

Sennett: I suspected that it might be possible and there were times when I secretly wished that "Moscow Gold" would be provided. Fund raising was a constant source of irritation to me but I knew it was necessary and I helped to pressure people to contribute and get others to do likewise. Many of the activities we had undertaken were severely limited because of the lack of funds and we were unable to achieve certain objectives because of that. There were times when party functionaries were not paid because there was no money to make the payroll that week.

MW: During this period, was there any discontent at your level with the national direction of the party or with the way things were going?

Sennett: There was some second guessing after certain decisions had been made. There were some questions being raised about the unavailable apparatus but there were no basic challenges to the line and direction of the party. The prevailing attitude of a besieged

movement was [that this was] hardly the time for challenging party policies.

MW: How many people were full-time staff members in Illinois?

Sennett: In 1951, we had fourteen people on the payroll. The average wage was about thirty dollars a week, but we paid on a sliding scale, depending on family circumstances: whether there were children, a working wife, other income; all of this entered into our calculations.

Alfred Wagenknecht was the senior member of our staff. He was once the chairman of the Illinois Communist party. He was included in the underground apparatus with his wife, Caroline Drew, at his insistence. Wag had been one of the founders of the Communist Labor party and became its executive secretary until the merger with the Communist party took place in 1921.

THE "DEEP FREEZE" UNDERGROUND

Sennett: Some people from our district became part of the underground deep freeze. They left their homes, usually with their spouses, and had no contact with the open organization or ours. Some of them were simply in reserve, in case of further repression, and others were part of the group helping to provide cover for those party leaders who had evaded arrest or imprisonment.

MW: Now, wait a minute. First of all, was that a term that you used then, deep freeze?

Sennett: I don't recall the term at that time. But that term distinguishes our operational function from theirs.

MW: Okay, but you are talking now about another separate underground apparatus?

Sennett: Yes, completely, except for a few liaison people from the unavailable apparatus who would see them for rare meetings. The deep freeze people did not function as a unified organizational body. The party leaders who evaded arrest when indicted, like Fred Fine, and those who were tried, sentenced to prison terms, and jumped bail to avoid imprisonment, like Gil Green, were functional members of the deep freeze. Under pseudonyms, they wrote for Political Affairs, the party's monthly theoretical magazine, [in which they] discussed policies.

- MW: But that was a separate underground operation built to support those people who were in trouble.
- Sennett: It was an attempt to provide for their participation in a restricted leadership capacity. They functioned as a sort of subterranean think tank.
- MW: I'm sorry, I'm having a little difficulty comprehending. Are we talking about two parallel underground structures, the deep freeze and the OBU?
- Sennett: Yes, that's right.
- MW: And the difference being what?
- Sennett: The difference being that the people in the OBU were those who had not been indicted but were in touch with the party membership through the existing open structure. Those of us in the OBU were likely to be indicted and many were as time went on. The deep freeze leadership was not operational. But through their writings, liaisons, transmittal of ideas, and critiques, they provided input to those of us in operational leadership.
- MW: Now, was there communication between the two apparatuses?
- Sennett: Yes, but communication was very circumspect. The deep freeze was an effective security operation. They were the people being sought by the FBI (but most of them were never caught). Eventually, they simply surrendered after hiding successfully for almost five years. They did this when the party had come to the conclusion that times were changing—that the McCarthyism was on the way out.
- MW: Now, how do you explain the apparent effectiveness of security among the deep freeze people versus the amateurism of the OBU?
- Sennett: It wasn't just a matter of amateurism. It was a matter of the OBU's contact with the open membership and the operational nature of its work.
- MW: So the deep freeze people were really simply in hiding then, weren't they. They weren't really a functioning apparatus.

DEEP FREEZE LEADERSHIP

Sennett: They were functioning in a limited manner but they were also helping to shape policy. There were some conflicts of opinion between them, the unavailable but operational leadership, and some of those in the open. There was a triad or recognized leadership with Max Weiss representing the OBU, Gil Green the deep freeze, and William Z. Foster the open membership. Foster was indicted under the Smith Act but was never brought to trial because of a serious heart condition.

MW: William Foster?

Sennett: Yes, William Z. Foster, the national chairman of the party. Eugene Dennis, the general secretary, was in prison serving a five-year term, as were all other members of the original national board except for Henry Winston who, with Gil Green, was in the deep freeze.

Gil Green had been sentenced to a five-year term. He refused to surrender to serve that term, as part of the party's plan to secure its leadership and make certain that not all of them were incarcerated at one time.

MW: Are you saying that he didn't make that decision on his own but that he was instructed by the party leadership to make that decision?

Sennett: That's pretty certain now.

MW: That would have come then from the national leadership?

Sennett: It was my understanding that Gil did not want to go into the deep freeze and was willing to surrender to go to prison. Fred Fine was indicted, but he was able to successfully operate in the deep freeze for five years before he surrendered.

MW: What does successfully operate mean, simply to avoid arrest?

Sennett: Basically to avoid arrest and to permit some input from him in discussions of policy and program.

MW: Which would mean going to meetings?

Sennett: Some meetings. They held infrequent meetings under, for them, illegal conditions. They communicated in different ways with certain people in the unavailable apparatus.

##

EFFECTIVENESS OF UNDERGROUND SECURITY

MW: I was just remarking on the effectiveness of the security for the deep freeze people. None was picked up, as you said earlier.

Sennett: No, that's not so. In fact, Gus Hall, the present general secretary of the Communist party, was picked up trying to get into Mexico when he was in the deep freeze. Bob Thompson, another member of the national board, under sentence, was captured about a year after he had jumped bail and entered the deep freeze. Several others, among those indicted only, were also picked up. After those arrests, the security of the leaders being sought in the deep freeze was not broken until they were ready to surrender.

After their surrender Gil Green and Henry Winston, who had been sentenced to serve five years for their political convictions, were given contempt of court sentences of three years extra each for failing to surrender on the date originally set. The others who had been indicted only had to go to trial. They were convicted, but those convictions were eventually set aside when the Supreme Court eventually voided the section of the Smith Act under which the Communist party leaders had been imprisoned.

MW: How many people were in the deep freeze at its largest number?

Sennett: The deep freeze contingent of those who were indicted or those who were sentenced to prison was not very large. I would say that all told, there were four members of the original national board and five others who had been indicted and not brought to trial. Along with them there were people in the support groups. I do not know the exact numbers but I would guess that there were seven or eight people in hiding. There probably were another fifty or seventy-five people involved in this part of the deep freeze apparatus. The "cover" group could have been arrested themselves for having--

MW: Aided and abetted?

Sennett: Yes, aided and abetted those indicted or already convicted of a "crime."

MW: Were they identified and charged with complicity?

Sennett: Not a single person in the supporting group was ever found, identified, or indicted.

MW: So that apparatus was really quite professional and secure as it was.

Sennett: Yes, it was.

MW: How do you explain that?

Sennett: By virtue of the fact that they had no contact with the open membership. They successfully integrated themselves in new communities and work places and they were not involved in any activity outside of work, home, and careful contact. There was better planning and careful control by the party leaders with whom they worked. I gather that some people were better at it than others even in that apparatus. I have learned that from talking to a few of the people who were involved.

Unlike the people in the deep freeze, the more numerous OBU people like myself, however, were apparently easily spotted. We were under surveillance from time to time, followed, bugged, and arrested almost at will, whenever the Justice Department got the cue from the FBI to move in on them. Even though the director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, technically worked for the Department of Justice, it seems that it was Hoover who was calling the shots, and not the other way around, when he was in power.

This became especially obvious to a number of us who were having serious misgivings about the crazy quilt structure that we had erected. Joseph Starobin, the former foreign editor of the Daily Worker, provides an informative background to the growing questions that were being raised in the Communist party, about the confusions and the frustrations of that period, in his book called American Communism in Crisis: 1943-1967.

I recall an especially eye-opening and rather humorous confrontation about the whole matter of our apparatus by our entire board with the FBI. [It happened] one day early in November of 1952. I was able to establish this date by checking the FBI files sent me under the Freedom of Information Act. We had arranged an all-day meeting of the district board in a private home in Chicago's Hyde Park. Several participants arriving at the meeting after Ed Starr and I reported in told us that they noticed some cars with two men each cruising suspiciously up the street. We had secured a list of license numbers of about a dozen FBI cars and we sent two of our people downstairs to scout those cars in the block in order to compare license numbers. To our surprise, we found four certain numbers and one car that didn't match our numbers, but certainly appeared to be part of the FBI group.

Since there had been no Smith Act arrests of any kind of current party leaders in Illinois, we thought that this was it. We were conveniently gathered in a meeting with all board members

present and if the FBI wanted us, they could get any of us or all of us. However, this did not appear to be their intent. They had probably picked up the tail of one or more of our members going to the meeting, and they converged upon this meeting as if by design. But they had apparently decided to make their surveillance known, to cause confusion and because they thought that they might help weaken the resolve of some of us.

MW: Now, are you just speculating about this?

Sennett: Yes, that's speculation but the FBI was working to recruit stool pigeons and there were some people who did weaken during that period and did cooperate with the FBI. They were also interested in causing dissension and creating rifts within our ranks and would obviously exploit any weaknesses among us. Anytime they heard that there was a possibility of talking to a member of the party they would move in quickly to do so. Party members generally didn't talk to the FBI and wouldn't give them interviews if they should be stopped on the street, in their homes, or places of work. The FBI would try to move in for any chance to talk to party members. They wanted names, information, potential evidence to be used against their comrades.

MW: You didn't discuss this with Swearingen, the agent who was writing that book about his role in the FBI, did you?

Sennett: Yes, I did. I did discuss that incident with him, and he said that there was no overall plan around our meeting.

MW: He was involved in this?

Sennett: No, he was not directly involved in that one, but he knew about it. He did admit that the FBI tried to soften up certain people so that they could become informants for the FBI or provide other helpful information.

We adjourned our meeting, advising board members to leave singly--some through the front door and others through the rear. In going over my FBI files, I note that they reported their encirclement of the meeting, but the names of the agents making the report are inked out. However, I could count the number of lines of agents signing the report and determined that there were eight agents involved in the surveillance that day.

They noted the time we went in, and they gave the exact time, by name, that each of us left. We usually staggered the time people would enter houses for meetings, and the agents reported that at the five-minute intervals. We broke up the planned meetings and had our people leave individually at fifteen minute-intervals.

All but Ed Starr and I had left late that afternoon. Ed and I were careful about our conversation because we had heard that the FBI was able to pick up conversations from their car on the outside. I don't know whether the technology for bugging was that sophisticated then but we assumed that it was and we "talked" by passing written notes back and forth.

After a period of quiet, without rustling about, we decided to leave, thinking that perhaps all FBI cars were gone by that time and the agents hadn't had a full count on the number of people who entered the house. We were mistaken. We left at 5:15 p.m. through the back door leading into the alley and ran right into an FBI car there. I said something like, "I don't know what your name is," to the two agents in the car and added, "Whatever you're doing, you're wasting your time." They laughed and responded, "We don't think so." And that was the end of that encounter.

MW: You say you were confronted by the FBI, but you really confronted them.

Sennett: We couldn't avoid it. We walked down and there they were. We knew that. We had informed all of our people, before they left (in writing) that they were to shake off the FBI tails before they returned to their homes. They were to make arrangements through their couriers to change their support systems, to relocate themselves, move out of their apartments, and those who had cars were to dispose of them. That was a particular pain in the neck. Then, of course, they also had to change their couriers as well.

QUESTIONING THE WISDOM OF THE UNDERGROUND

Sennett: Shortly thereafter, when our board regrouped, we met to discuss the FBI confrontation and the realities of security. While there was general agreement that our structure was faulty, to say the least, there was a division of opinion about the premise of an operational but unavailable leadership. This was the first time in our district that questions were raised about its advisability.

I took the point of view, as did several others, that we ought to disband it, but others demurred. However, we did agree that we would again consult with our unavailable national board before we took any action. The board's decision was to continue the OBU and to make ourselves more secure than we had in the past.

MW: But this was not the end then of the underground period?

Sennett: No, it was not.

MW: Then we will talk about that in the next session. Bill, you sort of agonized over this question for quite awhile.

Sennett: Yes, I did.

MW: Why was that?

Sennett: I don't know. I tried to figure out how to deal with it and I tried especially to answer a question, which I don't think I've answered very well even in those notes: What did we do? What kind of activity, outside of avoiding the FBI and supposedly preparing for possible illegality, were we able to conduct? There were some political campaigns, particularly the presidential and congressional races in 1952. But I have no recall on our role at that time. There were obviously board decisions on policy matters, but I don't remember them too well, and I was agonizing because of the fact that I didn't quite know how to deal with what might have been relevant or irrelevant.

MW: Do you mean if the whole enterprise was pointless or might have been pointless?

Sennett: That's right. In the last analysis it was pointless.

MW: But wasn't there a notion at the time that maybe you had a standby function? That is, you would set up this apparatus and then conditions might change abruptly and you might take certain kinds of covert actions or become a much more activist group or something like that? My point is, if you were facing a fascist America, as you believed was coming into existence with the Gestapos and all of that sort of thing, wasn't the idea that you would have an apparatus ready so that then if the whole party and everybody had to go underground--

Sennett: Sure, that was the idea.

MW: That this apparatus would be the core of it?

Sennett: It could be. But our analysis of the political direction being taken by the country was wrong.

MW: That didn't happen. So then the strategy appears a little pointless. But had it happened, and had you had better security, might it have been a good idea?

Sennett: Certainly, if the party had been made illegal, we would have had to find some way to function surreptitiously. We would have had to do that while at the same time we would have to try to figure out what could be done out in the open. But our sloppy apparatus was not geared to that kind of transition. However, even though the FBI knew where we were, could get to us when they wanted us, and obviously didn't choose to, I expected that a number of us would be arrested. I rationalized that our sloppy work would eventually lead to tighter controls and better security as we gained experience, but I fully expected to be arrested and to go to prison.

MW: Did you think that it was kind of pointless at the time before the confrontation with the FBI, before they observed that meeting, or did you then suddenly acquire that feeling after the meeting?

Sennett: The meeting kind of brought it to a head, but before that meeting I had some serious reservations like the incident that I mentioned about Molly and her child and Wagenknecht. Even Claude Lightfoot I felt could easily be identified and followed and this could lead to the entrapment of others. Wagenknecht, for example, worked with national groups, Communists and sympathizers in fraternal orders among Lithuanians, Greeks, Jews, and Italians. His method was to show up at open meetings unannounced. It was nothing short of ridiculous from the point of view of security. And in our meetings we spent so much time dealing with "security" measures without confronting the basic contradiction of a leadership supposedly underground trying to deal directly with people in the open.

MAINTAINING FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

MW: How did this period affect your relationship with Gussie and the children?

Sennett: We used to get together perhaps about every two or three months with the kids.

MW: Does that mean that you didn't see her for periods of three months at a time?

Sennett: No, I didn't.

MW: And you didn't see your kids?

Sennett: No, I didn't see the kids during those intervals.

MW: How did that affect your morale?

Sennett: As I recognized the ridiculous manner of our operation and the looseness [with which it] was being conducted and whether anything could be changed, I even became more careless. When we were told to continue our underground operation, I became more careless in the sense that I would see my family more often, as I knew that I could be arrested whether I lived at home or not. As far as the apparatus was concerned, I tried to do what I could to improve the security of the organization as a group. This was, of course, contradictory but certainly based on what I viewed as a practical consequence of the operational absurdity.

MW: Because you thought the whole operation was kind of a charade then.

Sennett: That's right. Shortly thereafter I brought the thing to a head.

MW: But then the family relations weren't badly damaged by this, at least at this juncture.

Sennett: No, we had another convenient retreat. My mother-in-law, Emily Drobis, had a place out in the country in Stevensville, Michigan, about seventy-five miles from Chicago. She had been an old-time party member even though she was no longer a Communist. Her husband, Andy, Gussie's stepfather, and she had run it as a resort in the past. It was a small farm-like ten-acre home with several units being rented out. Our family would get together there more regularly as time went on. Mollie West and Ed Starr would also make an occasional visit there.

Obviously the FBI figured out that they could find us there. And my Freedom of Information Act files show that they noted our visits and that the place was under surveillance.

MW: Okay, I think that pretty much covers that period. This will be the end of tape 18.

OPERATING IN THE OPEN AS PARTY SPOKESMAN

[Interview 10: March 19, 1982]##

MW: Where do you want to pick up the discussion of the period you were underground?



Above left: Barbara Sennett Bedard
1983.

Above right: Augusta "Gussie"
Machen Sennett, 1980.

Below left: Judy Sennett, 1983.

Below right: David Sennett,
Chicago, Thanksgiving 1956.

Sennett: The national board was asked to deal with the matter of the underground unavailable apparatus. We were told that in their view, objective conditions had not changed and that we were to tighten security measures, continue the underground apparatus, and improve our operation. We then reduced the number of members on the OBU board and appointed a trade union organizer, Jim Durkin, as the "available" substitute Communist party district organizer.

We narrowed the contact of our board's work. Ed Starr, for example, was the only one who had regular contact with Durkin. I flitted from the underground to a semi-open position to deal with the section leaders. A number of people, including Alfred Wagenknecht and Caroline Drew, went back into the deep freeze; that is, they were not involved in the unavailable apparatus. They were completely separated from any contact with anyone in the open or underground leadership except for Ed Starr.

Some months later, I too went back into the open along with Ray Tillman, his wife Naomi, Leon Katzen, and Mollie West. I was given the assignment of opening a joint Communist party and Daily Worker office in downtown Chicago along with Carl Hirsch, who was the Midwest correspondent for the Daily Worker and had been functioning in the open.

The operational but unavailable district board was then limited to only five remaining people: Claude Lightfoot, Geraldine Lightfoot, Ed Starr, David Englestein, and Sam Kushner.

I moved back with my family and I found it difficult to explain to my children what my absence was all about. Barbara, who was twelve years of age, said she understood that now that I was back home it meant that things were getting better in the United States and that the Fascists would probably not win after all. Judy, however, who was aged six, just kept asking me if I was now going to stay home all of the time.

My function was to be the open spokesman for the Communist party of Illinois.

MW: Were you the only one?

Sennett: I was the only one.

MW: So any pronouncement of the Illinois Communist party in that period would have been made by you.

Sennett: Yes. I acted in two capacities, as the political action and the public relations director. Carl Hirsch and I opened the office at 64 West Randolph Street in Chicago, and Fritzie Englestein, David Englestein's wife, took on the job of our administrative secretary. David, her husband, was still unavailable. Fritzie was a very warm and personable human being. She was level headed, loyal to the party, and less prone to doctrinaire rationalizations than a number of the other members. She was a very competent secretary. She had worked in the district office of the party in the past. But even more important, she had good political judgment, was excellent in dealing with party and nonparty people. In her capacity, Fritzie had to deal with the commercial press, people in various left organizations, cranks, provocateurs, the FBI, and so on.

MW: What communication did you have during this period with the national leadership?

Sennett: When I came out into the open, I was in touch with those open people who were then functioning in the national leadership, among them Betty Gannett and Pettis Perry.

MW: How do you spell Gannett?

Sennett: G-a-n-n-e-t-t. Betty Gannett had been the national educational director of the party, and she and Perry had been indicted under the Smith Act. They had been tried, convicted, and were appealing the decisions against them to the higher courts.

MW: They were in New York?

Sennett: Yes.

MW: Your communication with them was by mail or by telephone?

Sennett: My communication was by mail, by telephone, and trips to New York for various meetings.

MW: How extensive was that communication? Did you talk to them once a week on the phone?

Sennett: I can't recall the frequency of our contact but I made several trips to New York in 1953.

MW: Several meaning how many?

Sennett: Several within the period of a year; probably three. There were other national functionaries who came into Chicago for meetings as well as people from other districts.

MW: As party spokesman, did you have to clear what you would say publicly with anyone?

Sennett: Not necessarily. But I would consult with the party leadership on policy and programmatic issues and statements whenever possible. With a lot of help from Carl Hirsch, I would write articles, stories for the Worker and Daily Worker, press releases, and so forth.

MW: You were confident that you knew what the general party line was?

Sennett: I thought I understood it well enough to represent the positions taken by the party.

OPPOSITION TO THE BROYLES BILLS

Sennett: The efforts to illegalize the Communist party were not limited to federal legislation. A number of states either passed or attempted to pass bills against "sedition" and to specifically illegalize the Communist party. In Illinois, for example, there was a state senator, Paul Broyles, who was in the forefront of the legislative effort to "curb communism." He introduced bills to illegalize the Communist party in 1949 and at three subsequent sessions in 1951, 1953, and 1955. While defeated at every session by the legislature or the governor's veto, his bills came closest to passage in 1953.

MW: What was the nature of these bills?

Sennett: Senate Bill 101 would set up a seditious activity investigation commission. That body would be given broad authority to investigate charges of subversion against organizations and individuals. Senate Bill 102 would create the office of a special assistant state attorney general with the authority to prosecute those charged by the commission with seditious activity. While the Communist party was the first intended victim to be declared illegal under these bills, dozens of other non-Communist organizations were targeted for investigation and eventual prosecution. And members of organizations determined to be "seditious" would be subject to prosecution and imprisonment.

MW: Was any other specific group cited in the bills besides Communists?

Sennett: Teachers were. They would be required to sign loyalty affidavits.

Edward Clammage, who was head of the American Legion's Americanism Committee in 1953, testified in behalf of passage of the Broyles bills. He stated very clearly that they were aimed at what he considered all parts of the Communist conspiracy and he named as examples such organizations as the American Friends Service Committee, the Independent Voters of Illinois (a branch of the Americans for Democratic Action), the American Jewish Congress, the Save Our Sons Committee (which was an organization of parents of GIs), the American Civil Liberties Union, the United Electrical Workers Union, and the CIO United Packinghouse Workers Union. These organizations were the ones he specifically named in his testimony. However, he left no doubt that he had a much longer list in mind.

Since the Communist party of Illinois would be the first victim of the Broyles bills, I attempted to testify, as a party witness, as to the intent of the bills and allegations that our organization was part of a worldwide conspiracy. There was a senate committee holding hearings on these bills. It was called the Aeronautics and Military Affairs Committee. The yea-sayers were stacked in that body.

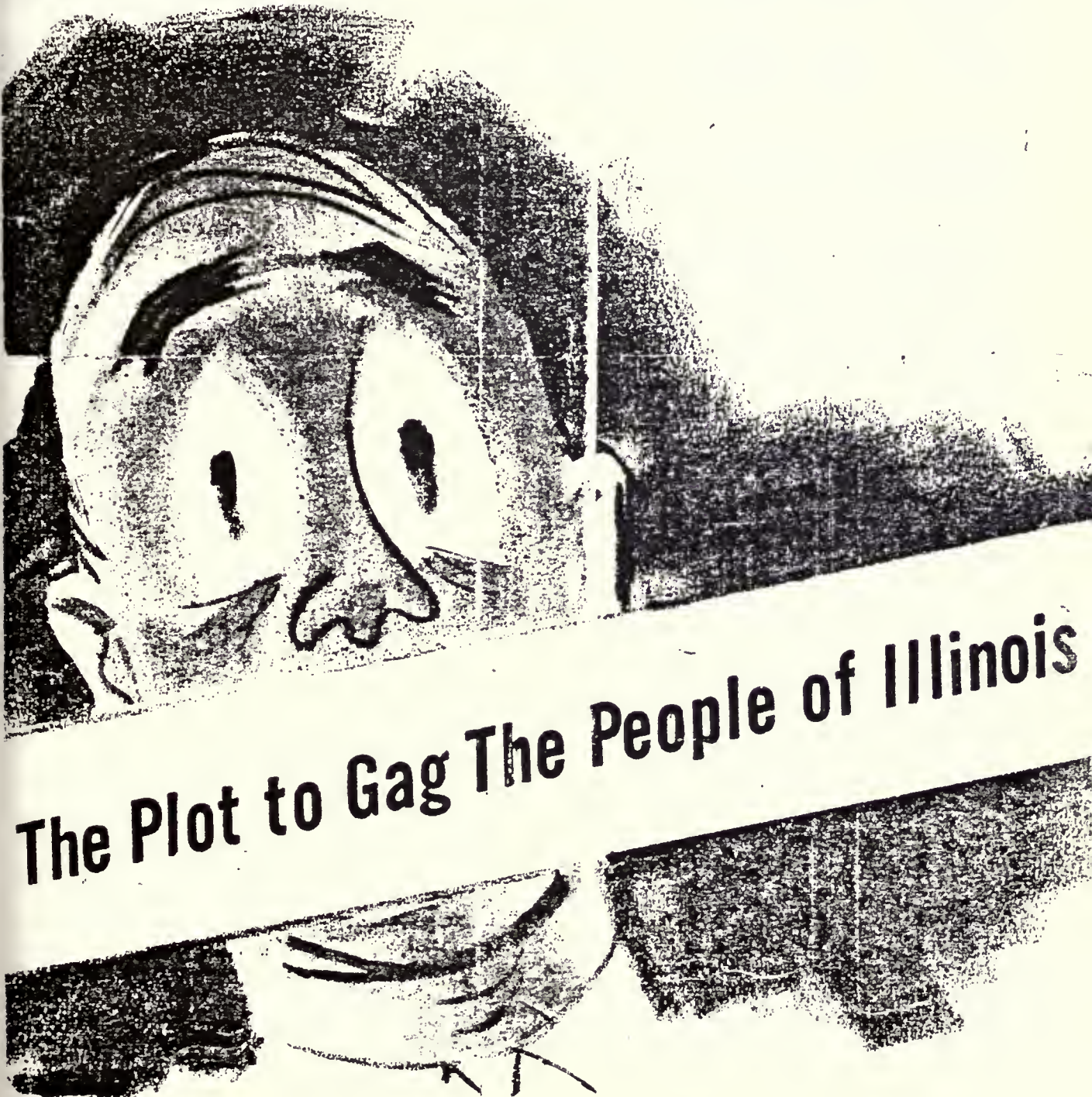
MW: What do you mean the yea-sayers?

Sennett: Those who believed in passing the bill were in the great majority in that committee. The appropriate body would have been the Senate Judiciary Committee but Broyles and his supporters felt the bills would have tougher going there.

MW: Were these hearings held in Springfield?

Sennett: They were held in Springfield, the capital of Illinois. I was not allowed to testify before that body. I asked for permission to attend and to testify, but permission was not granted. So I issued a public statement, which I sent to every member of the committee and which I made public for the press, and in summary this statement said: "These bills actually accuse us of espionage, sabotage, terrorism, and other unlawful acts. Yet Senator Broyles himself knows that such overt criminal acts have never been committed or proven against the Communist party in this state or in any other state. Even now, under the Smith Act frame-up trials against our party leaders, the government did not and was unable to charge any individual Communist or the party as a whole with such crimes."

THE BROYLES BILLS^{*}



The Plot to Gag The People of Illinois

DID YOU CHEER...

when the door was opened for PEACE in Korea?

**If you did, and the Broyles Bills become law in our state,
YOU could be investigated as a "subversive."**

RIDICULOUS? According to both State Senator Broyles who sponsored the so-called anti-subversive bills and Ed Clamage, the professional witch-hunter of the American Legion, those who spoke up for an end to the war in Korea were either "Communists" or "dupes, dopes and suckers." And they made it clear that the Broyles bills would give them the authority to investigate and to prosecute as criminals those who favored peace!

But, you will say, the overwhelming majority of Americans cheered the agreement to exchange sick and wounded prisoners. They are anxious to see the Korean war end. And more. They wish with all their heart that there is an end to the cold war and that agreements for a lasting peace with Russia and China are reached.

The sponsors and backers of the Broyles bills know of this sentiment. That's why they talk about the "menace of communism." For Communists have been accused of every crime in the book and may even be blamed if the Sox failed to win the pennant this year.

How the Broyles Bills Would Work

Senate Bill 101 sets up a "Seditious Activities Investigation Commission." This body would be given \$65,000 to look into "subversive activities" in the state. What is "subversive"?

Well, world peace could become the number one "subversive" activity. After all, to have peace, agreements must be reached with Communist-led countries. And this in turn

would put an end to the need for \$70 billion a year for war preparations. It could reduce taxes, it would save lives and it would put peacetime construction of new homes, roads, etc. on the order to the day.

Then there is activity for a Fair Employment Practices law in Illinois. Why, in Mount Vernon where Broyles hails from, they not only discriminate against Negroes in employment, they "bump" Negroes off the buses when whites want to ride.

Broyles and the sponsors of his "anti-subversive" bills are against F.E.P.C. and would investigate those who favor it.

If you or your organization worked for or favored rent control, more workmen's compensation or dissented in any way from the policies of those in control, the "Seditious Activities Investigation Commission" would question your loyalty!

SENATE BILL 102

This fascist-like bill would provide for a little dictator who would be politely called an Assistant Attorney General. This super-snooper would be given authority to prosecute those labeled "subversive." Teachers would be required to sign "loyalty" affidavits, the Communist Party would be made illegal and its members subject to prosecution and imprisonment for up to 20 years. All other organizations declared "subversive" would be illegalized and the members of these organizations considered guilty by association.

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NOTE STIRS TRUCE HOPE

Fantastic?

Yes. But unfortunately true. And it's happening right here in the state of Illinois.

Ed Clamage, one of the chief sponsors of the Broyles bills and a crusader for fascism, recently testified in Springfield for his bills. He explained exactly who these bills were aimed against and who he considered part of the "Communist conspiracy":

- The American Friends Service Committee, a pro-peace religious group.
- The Independent Voters of Illinois, a liberal political group.
- The American Jewish Congress.
- The Save Our Sons Committee, an organization of parents of G.I.'s.
- The American Civil Liberties Union.
- The United Electrical Workers Union
- The United Packinghouse Workers Union (C.I.O.)

The 'Communist Conspiracy' Alibi

The war profiteers of the big corporations and big banks get their political fronts like McCarthy, Velde, and Broyles to shout "Communism" day in and day out. They hope to bulldoze the public with the "menace of communism" hokum.

The headline-hunting crowd in Washington and in Springfield are operating the biggest racket in our country today. They have been able to create an atmosphere of fear and hysteria in many unions, in the schools and in many civic organizations and institutions.

Those who become victims of the "Communist conspiracy" bogey are falling prey to

the biggest lie spread in our country. This big lie has led to the loss of many civil liberties for millions of Americans and has helped to undermine democratic rights long taken for granted in our country.

Yes, there are Communists in Illinois. They are people like yourself, people who share your concern for a decent life.

Communists believe in a society called Socialism where the fruits of our toil will be used for the common good and where fear of the morrow is banished forever. Communists believe in production for use. What's good for the people should not be decided by General Motors and the big trusts who provide work only when they can reap big profits.

But Communists are not idle dreamers. We think that Americans should be given the opportunity to organize for better wages and working conditions, for better schools, for rent control, for more and improved housing, for an end to discrimination. We think that the cherished aims of peace and security must be fought for and that they can be won.

When Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated as President he said that "This country with its institutions belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it."

This statement by Lincoln would cause an investigation by Broyles if Lincoln were alive today. And Lincoln would face 20 years in prison if the Broyles bill were law.

Who Uses Force and Violence?

Communists do not believe in or advocate force and violence. This is true in the work of Communists for the immediate needs of working people or in the ultimate goal of a socialist society.

Force and violence has been used against Communists as it has against union people who fought for the right to organize or who struck for better conditions. There have been dozens of frameups against Communists in this country under the Smith Act but no court has been able to convict a Communist on any other basis but for ideas held and advocated. No violence or overt criminal acts have ever been committed or proven against the Communist Party or any Communist, in this state or in any other state in our country.

THE BROYLES BILLS MUST BE DEFEATED!

Despite the fact that the Broyles bills have been defeated in 1949 and in 1951 they could pass this year.

Not enough people know about the dangers represented by these bills. Not enough of us have taken the time and trouble to tell our legislators:

Vote "NO" on the Broyles Bills!

Get in touch with your state senator, your state representatives immediately. Write or wire to Governor Stratton in Springfield. Get your lodge, your union, your church, your PTA to act.

**Time Is Short But An
Aroused Public Can Defeat
The Broyles Bills!**

* Brochure written by William Sennett and Carl Hirsch.

Issued by: Communist Party of Illinois,
P.O. Box 1132, Chicago 90, Illinois

MW: What are you quoting from?

Sennett: I am quoting from my statement to the senate committee.

MW: The text of which you still have?

Sennett: The text of what I would have said had I attended the committee hearing.

MW: But you still have that document?

Sennett: Only second-hand. The FBI had copied it for their files and sent it on to me.

MW: Under the Freedom of Information Act?

Sennett: Yes, under the Freedom of Information Act.

MW: So you are quoting from the FBI's summary version of your statement?

Sennett: That is correct.

MW: Can you recall whether you at the time made much in your public statement of that fact that they wouldn't let you testify?

Sennett: Yes, I did. I protested the fact that they did not let me testify and insisted that this was a denial of my civil liberties.

MW: I would think the public would view that as somewhat unfair that you were being attacked and not allowed to reply.

Sennett: A certain portion of the public did. I don't recall whether the press gave that part any publicity.

Needless to say, the senate committee passed these bills in March of 1953 and then the house Judiciary Committee scheduled hearings in early May of that year. This time, over three hundred representatives of organizations like those named by Ed Clammage and many others, including church groups, the League of Women Voters, many more unions, including the Illinois State CIO council, attended to testify against the bills and to prevent their adoption. This was a broad-based grouping and included many blacks, women, professionals, and business people. The people who decided to attend, the organizations who decided to send representatives, were very much alarmed by the action of the senate committee, which had recommended that these bills be passed into law.

MW: This other committee, the judiciary committee, was a more equitably composed committee?

Sennett: It appeared to be.

MW: They were willing to hear?

Sennett: They were willing to hear more witnesses. I requested the right to testify, and my request was acknowledged, and I was invited to attend. When I got to Springfield, I was listed as one of the witnesses. The representatives of the American Civil Liberties Union, who themselves were planning to testify against the proposed measures, tried to persuade me not to attend the hearing but especially not to speak as a witness. They thought that as a Communist representative I would hurt the opposition cause. I told them that I disagreed with them. I appreciated their support and involvement but I thought that since the main initial target of the Broyles bills was the Communist party, that a Communist party representative speaking for the organization should be visible and deserved to be heard.

MW: In retrospect, do you still think that was a good strategy?

Sennett: I think so. In fact, I think that we gained some adherents as a result of my presence because of the fact that I was denied a right to speak. I think it also helped to show that Communists are human beings and that they are visible and they have something to say.

The hearings of the judiciary committee were packed with over one hundred legislators in attendance, hundreds of pro-Broyles bills supporters, in addition to the many opponents I have mentioned. I was called as the first listed witness to speak from the podium of the auditorium. I think that was very carefully calculated because as soon as I stated my name and said that I represented the Communist party of Illinois, the microphone was cut off instantly. The chairman then explained to the legislators and the other people in attendance that committee witnesses were bound by a rule that had been adopted by the committee: a) they must answer the question, are you a member of the Communist party? b) If the answer was yes or if the witness refused to answer that question, he or she would then not be permitted to testify.

After the rules were explained, I began to speak without benefit of the mike, protesting the gag. At that point, the sergeant-at-arms was called by the chair and, with three other burly guards, they forcibly removed me from the platform and ejected me from the auditorium.

MW: Was there press coverage of this?

Sennett: There was press coverage, which didn't make very much of this at all. There was a line in the local newspaper and another line or two in the Chicago newspapers, referring to the fact that I was denied the opportunity to speak and that I was then removed from the auditorium. I don't remember whether they said I was forcibly removed, but I certainly was forcibly removed. I was physically and bodily lifted up from the podium [laughs], taken down the stairs, and dragged out.

MW: Was there anyone at the time who articulated the view that you ought to have your day in court?

Sennett: Yes, there was a legislator on the committee who actually protested. He said that even Communists are entitled to free speech. He said that he was switching his vote--he originally had intended to vote for the Broyles bills--in view of the kind of treatment that was given to a witness, even though that witness happened to be a representative of the Communist party.

I was, however, not treated so kindly by most of the legislators, who hissed and shouted vile epithets in my direction. It was obvious that the committee was going to vote in favor of the proposed legislation, despite its clearly unconstitutional features.

MW: I wonder what would have happened with those hearings today. That story would make good television copy, your being ejected forcibly or going out of the auditorium onto the steps outside. Therefore [it] might not have happened under present-day circumstances.

Sennett: That's probably true. The [print] press was dominant in those days and not television. Many events occurred that were buried by the press. There was more police brutality, breaking up of demonstrations, all kinds of terror tactics against radicals. And the press, in the main, did not write stories about what were really newsworthy and important events. It wasn't often that actions of that kind got any publicity. Sometimes when an open rally or a demonstration for jobs or even picket lines by unions for economic demands, there would be some photos taken and, in the main, it was the so-called side of law and order that got the favorable publicity. The opposition or victims were not quoted nor given an opportunity to tell their side.

MW: That's my speculation, that television being so concerned about getting interesting pictures of action happening would be inclined to photograph this because it's interesting pictures to put on the evening news, whereas it's much easier for the newspapers to suppress and they are not so dependent upon the visual aspects.

Sennett: With the hysterical atmosphere of McCarthyism that was prevalent in 1953, both houses of the Illinois legislature passed the Broyles bills. However, because of their unconstitutional nature and growing pressure by the opposition to those measures through letters, telegrams, phone calls, delegations and other forms of public expression, the then Republican governor of Illinois, William Stratton, vetoed the bills and the legislature was unable to get the necessary two-thirds votes to override the veto.

Carl Hirsch and I wrote a series of articles for the Daily Worker on the meaning of the Broyles bills and how the fight that was undertaken made it possible to defeat them. We concluded, ". . . that the most positive lesson of the fight is that McCarthyism can be halted and Fascist legislation is by no means inevitable if broad united actions are forged."*

THE FBI POLITICAL SURVEILLANCE NETWORK

Sennett: The harrassment and witch hunts of that period were dealt with by the very well-known liberal author and editor, I. F. Stone, who wrote that the FBI was the American secret police. In the 50s, under its notorious director, J. Edgar Hoover, the secret police had over fourteen thousand people in its employ and thousands of additional paid and unpaid informants in unions, in the Communist party, in hundreds of other organizations, and among neighbors spying on neighbors. Though the Communist party had dwindled to probably less than twenty thousand members in 1950, Hoover told Congress in that year that there was a potential fifth column of 550,000 people in the United States who might be subject to detention in an emergency because they were dedicated to the Communist philosophy.

The FBI harrassed members of the Communist party, non-Communists, other radical organizations, fraternal societies, union organizers and union organizations, members of liberal movements, and even nonradical family members, friends and acquaintances of suspected liberals and radicals, even though they personally had no involvement at all in radical or liberal movements.

* July 24, 1953.

In Chicago a number of people lost their jobs due to intimidation and harrassment by the FBI. The FBI used its authority to "advise" employers that certain employees were members of "subversive organizations." They couldn't actually tell an employer to discharge the employee but in the atmosphere of the fear generated by McCarthyism in that period employers drew the conclusion that it was not wise to have suspected "subversives" working for them.

Neighbors were warned, for example, that certain people in their neighborhoods were dangerous Reds--suspicion, rumors, scare tactics and even radical hostility were weapons regularly used by FBI agents, or by provocateurs and informants enlisted in their behalf.

Surveillance was widespread. My children and the children of dozens of people I knew were followed to school, spied on at summer camps, dogged by agents at playgrounds and while visiting friends. This led some parents, who were visited by the FBI only because they had children who were friends of kids under surveillance, to tell their own children that they should not play with their "radical" friends any more.

The illegal acts of the FBI in Illinois were legion. I learned from my own experience and that of others that the agency tapped telephones, bugged homes, offices, and businesses, and undertook illegal entries and searches. I was not, however, aware of the great dimension of this kind of dirty work until many years later. One example was the testimony of the former agent who visited me only several years ago, Wesley Swearingen, who told a congressional committee that he personally took part in about three hundred "black bag" jobs in Chicago. These were the illegal break-ins of homes in that period, and that was the period from 1952 to 1963 when he worked for the Chicago office.

MW: This was the man who broke into your place?

Sennett: Yes. My good friend, Fred Fine, who lives in Chicago, told me of a humorous incident dealing with FBI surveillance.

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MW: You were talking about this incident that Fred Fine told you about.

Sennett: Yes, there was a widespread search by the FBI to find Fred and have him arrested so that he could be brought to trial, based on his indictment under the Smith Act. A family friend of Fred's,

who was close to Fred's father and mother, had a tailor shop in Chicago. The tailor was visited by the FBI in the process of the search. The tailor was asked whether he knew of Fred's whereabouts or whether he had seen him lately. The tailor, using an old Jewish expression, answered, "I am ninety-eight percent sure I don't know and haven't seen him." When Fred visited the man after he surrendered for trial, the tailor told him, "You have no idea what that two percent in my statement meant to the FBI." He said that his phone was then bugged, customers were visited, and his place was put under surveillance. The FBI kept visiting his store regularly to ask him over and over again about Fred's whereabouts.

MW: That's just an old expression to say "I'm ninety-eight percent sure" of something?

Sennett: Yes, it's a Jewish expression.

MW: But he meant in fact that he had--

Sennett: That he hadn't seen him.

SMITH ACT INDICTMENTS OF PARTY MEMBERS

Sennett: In May of 1954, Claude Lightfoot, the district chairman of the Communist party, was arrested and indicted under section two of the Smith Act. Claude was the first Communist to be indicted under this section, which dealt with membership in the Communist party. The Communist leaders who had been previously indicted and those brought to trial were charged with alleged conspiracy to teach and advocate the overthrow of a government by force and violence. Under the membership section there was the element of being arrested, tried, and imprisoned for the simple reason of being a member of the Communist party and knowing that it taught and advocated the overthrow of the government by force and violence.

MW: The Smith Act in effect was a bill which made membership illegal. It was in effect a banning of the Communist party then?

Sennett: It was not a banning or illegalization of the Communist party as such, but it made membership, and "knowing" membership, illegal.

MW: Then that's the same as banning it, isn't it, if it's illegal to belong to it?

Sennett: For all practical purposes it would have done that, but it did not specifically state that the Communist party per se is now an illegal organization. It simply charged and indicted the leadership on the basis of the advocacy--the conspiracy to advocate the overthrow--and the second part of that act related to membership, that is "knowing" as a member that the Communist party advocated--

MW: I see, it wasn't simply that you were a member, but you were a member who knew.

Sennett: That is correct. Members could contend they didn't know or believe the party advocated force and violence. Claude's case was therefore a test case and he was the first one in the country to be indicted under that section. This explains why there were no arrests in Chicago under the conspiracy section of the Smith Act, that is, teaching and advocating. What the Justice Department intended to do was broaden the scope and network for arresting party members. We undertook a campaign to publicize Lightfoot's arrest and to try to lower his bail which had been set at thirty thousand dollars--a lot of money in 1953.

After Claude's arrest we liquidated the unavailable apparatus and re-established our open board. Claude was in jail. He was not present, but we reconstituted a district board of the remaining board members who were not in the deep freeze. In addition to my responsibilities as the public relations director, I also took on my old job as organizational secretary.

MW: This was in 1954?

Sennett: Yes. One day in June of that year I received a call from the manager of the CBS local radio station, WBBM. He asked if I would be willing to be interviewed about the Claude Lightfoot case. I said that I would and I was asked to come to the radio station headquartered in Chicago's Wrigley Building to record a tape for a program called "WBBM was There." The specific subject, I was told, as part of the program, which was to be broadcast on July 4, was "What American Liberties Mean to Me." From the FBI files I received under the Freedom of Information Act, I learned that the station manager had been approached by the Bureau to set me up for this interview so that I might be provoked into saying something "seditious" for the record. The FBI also indicated in my files that I was being set up to be indicted under the Smith Act and they were building a case against me as well as several other Communist leaders.

MW: You say that your files indicate that you were being set up. They didn't use the words--

Sennett: No, but my files indicate that I was being processed to be indicted and the FBI enlisted the illegal collaboration of the station manager and other members working at WBBM.

MW: This was, in effect, a plot to entrap you then?

Sennett: Yes, it was. There is no question now that I have the full record as shown by the FBI Freedom of Information files that were released to me at my request in 1979.

MW: Presumably, the station was complicit in this?

Sennett: They certainly were. It was as though they were following orders without question. The tape of that interview was sent directly to J. Edgar Hoover by the Chicago office. Their memo to the chief stated that the first portion of the tape recording was made during a preliminary conversation with me about which I was not aware and that the whole conversation was being recorded. The second portion was acknowledged to me as a recording--I recall that, too--by the station manager and the technicians. They started off by telling me that they would pose some "practice" questions which would not be taped but the record shows that there was a secret mike in place and a recording was being made of the so-called preliminary discussion.

MW: You showed me your FBI file. It contained the full transcript of this preliminary conversation and the actual interview.

Sennett: It certainly does, and I am a little surprised because much of the material which the FBI sent me from their files has been inked out. I usually get a little blip and then a lot of information on the pages sent is crossed out and unreadable. But the WBBM tape and the report of the station manager to the FBI seem to be typed out in full. The tape was a half-hour interview segment and it was obvious they never intended to use it for broadcast.

MW: And it was never broadcast?

Sennett: No, it was never broadcast. The station was simply acting in behalf of the FBI. One would think that a controversial subject about communism in those days would have been part of an interesting program, especially with an avowed Communist. But the press and radio collaborated in scaring the country with the bogey of communism while helping to hide communism and real Communists from view, print, and hearing.

MW: But didn't it strike you as funny that given the climate of the times, this radio station would broadcast a program on what liberty means to you, a Communist, on the Fourth of July?

Sennett: I thought it was a great subject if they would let me expound upon it.

MW: But didn't it seem kind of fishy to you?

Sennett: It did, but I grabbed at every opportunity to get publicity and I thought I had nothing to lose. After all, I had nothing to hide in terms of what I would say and what I said for the public record or even for the station manager's record.

MW: It didn't occur to you to say, "Are you going to guarantee to me that this is going to be broadcast?"

Sennett: He assured me that it would. He said very definitely that it was going to be broadcast on July 4 and we had to have a little bit of go around in advance to make sure that I understood their format. That was the recorded part which I did not get, but that was the basis of our preliminary discussion.

MW: When it wasn't broadcast, did you call the station and ask why?

Sennett: Yes, I did.

MW: What did they say?

Sennett: I did not get a return reply. The manager would not speak to me. I got the runaround after that. I was asked a wide range of questions by the interviewer who was simply acting in behalf of the FBI. These questions ranged from the Lightfoot case to my education, my reasons for joining the Young Communist League, and the Communist party, my attitude toward America, the position of the Communist party on a whole range of issues, the matter of revolution and violence, what side I would be on in case of a war with Russia, and so on and so forth.

QUESTION OF LOYALTY IN US-RUSSIA WAR

MW: Now, I have read the document in your file relevant to this, both the transcript and the FBI commentary on the transcript, and they comment that on the question of whether or not you would fight on America's side in case of a war with Russia that you were in fact evasive. I read your statement and it struck me that it was evasive, too.

Sennett: I agree, in retrospect, that it was evasive. In those days, that was a very ticklish and difficult question for Communists to answer. Of course I would make a different kind of statement today. I think that the point I was trying to get across that had validity was that if the United States would go to war with Russia, it could only be a Fascist-controlled United States and that if I were a German and a German anti-Fascist I would not have gone to war on behalf of a Fascist Germany. I was trying to make that point. Since I could not conceive of a Soviet attack against us, I did not respond by saying that I would defend the security of the United States or that I would fight for our country if invaded...

MW: By the Russians?

Sennett: Yes, by the Russians. I was defensive in my views about the Soviet Union and considered that they could do no wrong.

MW: What it seemed to me to reveal was that you simply did not want to take any kind of position critical of the Soviet Union or indicate that under any circumstances you would manifest any hostility toward the Soviet Union.

Sennett: That is correct. I started from the premise that the Soviet Union was the workers' motherland and that applied to those of us who were Communists in the United States. I therefore could not criticize the motherland, the international representatives of the working class of the world. I viewed the Soviet Union as a model country with a philosophy and social system that transcended its national borders. I considered it as the bulwark of peace in the world and concerned with the fate of all mankind.

MW: Okay, but why not then come flat out and say, no, I would never fight against the Soviet Union?

Sennett: I felt that that would be an antagonistic kind of answer and that it was not the right answer. I felt that the American people would be antagonized by that kind of direct statement and it would play into the hands of those generating anti-Communist hysteria in the country.

MW: As I read your transcript, I got the impression that when you evaded on that question, that that sort of gave the game away, that the average listener would look at it and say, "Aha, his real loyalties are with the Soviet Union, not with the United States."

Sennett: I agree with you. I realize that now, but I did not then.

- MW: No one ever discussed that then? Surely, that line, the line you took in public on those kinds of questions which came up over and over again like the old issue of "better Red than dead" and so forth--part of the litany of right-wing propaganda of that period--wasn't there ever any discussion about what was the most effective propaganda stance to take in dealing with that kind of hostile question?
- Sennett: Not specifically, although I remember that after that taping, I discussed that question with some of my comrades. I indicated that I was not happy with the kind of answer I had given. I wanted to get some of their ideas of a better way of dealing with the matter. While we kicked this around a little there wasn't much, in essence, different than the position I had expressed.
- MW: Now, was there any feeling that some of your comrades in the party elsewhere would see a statement--if you said you would fight to defend America against the Russians that this would get you in trouble with Communists elsewhere?
- Sennett: It certainly would have caused a stir if I had really believed and expressed that.
- MW: Then doesn't this boil down to the fact that your primary loyalties were to the Soviet Union and not to the United States?
- Sennett: Yes, but only from the point of view of governments and governmental policies.
- MW: So what the right-wing was saying about the Communist party was true.
- Sennett: Not exactly. I distinguished between government and the American people. I considered myself a loyal American. After all, I was involved in struggles and campaigns that dealt with the impact of issues and policies as they affected the interests of the people of my country. As a Communist, I was organizing, agitating, educating to improve conditions for American workers, blacks, minorities, women and all disadvantaged people. We were dealing with economic issues, union organization, equal rights for women, civil rights, a health program for all who needed it, civil liberties, social justice, and so forth. Our policies were not decided upon to benefit the Russians but to benefit the Americans. And they were decided on here in the United States, not in Moscow.

On the other hand, we American Communists did have blind faith in the Soviet Union. In our mind, the Soviet government was the product of a workers' revolution that had done away with exploitation, wiped out racist and nationalist policies, supported

and fostered the right of peoples and nations to self determination and was the bulwark for world peace. We considered that they could make mistakes but that they, consciously, could do no wrong.

MW: But it seems to me what this adds up to, Bill, is that although J. Edgar Hoover's statistics were probably outrageous--550,000 members of a fifth column in this country--it is reasonable to say that the Communist party was a fifth column in the sense that they were loyal to the Soviet Union and not to the United States should there be a conflict between the two.

Sennett: I don't believe that that would be true if the American government was a democratic regime and not a Fascist one.

MW: In effect I guess it was inconceivable to you that there could be a conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union unless the United States were a Fascist country.

Sennett: That is correct. In my mind it was inconceivable that a democratic United States could go to war against the Soviet Union. To me, that was a contradiction.

MW: And inconceivable that the Soviet Union would attack a democratic United States?

Sennett: That is correct. Now, given that position, one could rationalize it.

MW: Interesting.

EFFECTS OF McCARTHYISM

Sennett: The intimidation of supposedly independent institutions by the FBI during the period of McCarthyism was also shown by the position taken by the Illinois State Bar Association. I had written them a letter about the Lightfoot case and I asked them to examine the indictment on membership grounds to determine whether this was a clear violation of civil and constitutional liberties. I suggested that if it was, in fact, such a violation, they would be performing an important public service by looking into that matter. In view of the high bail established, I also asked them to judge whether this was a reasonable or unreasonable amount based on the charge indicated.

The letter was addressed to Karl C. Williams, president of the association. He did not communicate with me, but my Freedom of Information FBI files show that he thought it was important

enough to report this to the FBI. He sent them a copy of the letter and refused in any way to comply with the request that I had made.

MW: It doesn't speak too well for the Bar Association, does it?

Sennett: It doesn't speak too well for a lot of institutions. Even the American Civil Liberties Union, although they took an opposing position on the matter of the Broyles bills, was intimidated to some extent during the period of McCarthyism. They soft-pedaled their defense of Communists and expelled a Communist leader, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, from their membership. This was a growing disease even among some liberal organizations based upon fear and intimidation at that time.

MW: It would be interesting to know if their fairly courageous stand in defense of the Nazis in recent years is the result of some recognition that they were mistaken in not defending Communists in the McCarthy period; that is, you were both sort of pariahs in the American political system and they failed to defend the pariahs of the left, but are now willing to defend the pariahs of the right.

Sennett: I think the student actions, peace activities, and civil rights movements in the 60s had a lot to do with those changes. Millions of people, in one way or another, learned then that important changes were needed in our social, economic, and political system.

MW: Bill, you let me read that section of your FBI file for that period, and there are a couple of other things in there that interested me. May I ask you a question about them?

Sennett: Surely.

MW: There is one document in there which indicated that the FBI approached you in a subway tunnel and spoke to you as you were walking along in that tunnel. They then wrote a commentary or a report on that which indicated that they thought it significant that you were willing to talk to them in an area where you could not be observed by others. They thought you were under party discipline not to talk to the FBI, but that you had done this where you couldn't be observed. They, therefore, concluded that perhaps they could get you to talk under other circumstances if they could get you in a situation where no one would know about it. It appears from those documents, particularly the kinds of paragraphs that are Xed out, that they were planning to make that effort and to perhaps recruit you as an informant, thinking that you might be vulnerable to that. Do you recall it?

Sennett: In the first place, I think that little episode proves that there was no value in people talking to the FBI. The only purpose of their discussion was to try to recruit you as an informant to get information about other people which they didn't have. It so happens that that tunnel, which is Chicago's downtown underground, is part of the city's subway system. It runs from Dearborn Street to State Street, a full block. If you will notice, in reading the FBI's memo, there was no one else in the tunnel but myself and four agents. I was literally trapped in the tunnel and I had to walk from the one block to another in the tunnel with FBI agents at each side.

The first thing I thought about [was], what the hell can I do about this. I couldn't start to run in the tunnel, so I figured, boy, I've got a long walk. I've got to get to State Street from Dearborn Street, and in order to do that, I have got to walk with these agents. As a result, they started to talk to me. I made some off-the-cuff remarks and since I didn't curse or berate them they indicated that they thought I sounded friendly. Well, I wasn't about to shout or to swear or to do anything else and, frankly, I didn't even want to be polite. I said I didn't want to talk to them but they took that as something that they could brush off very easily. You will recall that they said as soon as I got to the stairway which led to the street, I ran up and away as fast as I could. That was the only chance I had to break away from them. If I had been able to do so, I would have done it as soon as they approached me. When I then read that report in my FBI files I also learned that they believed further contact would make me amenable to discussion. I guess it would have been a coup for an agent or agents to be able to report to the "boss" that they had a friendly reception. The "boss" (J. Edgar Hoover) seems to have sent lots of direct correspondence to his agents advising them on each step to be taken.

The agents wrote several letters, in a subsequent file about me, to J. Edgar Hoover asking for permission to contact me again. Apparently, there was a rule in the FBI that you could only contact a suspect or somebody that you were tailing directly if you got permission from J. Edgar himself. I don't know how the man had all of that time, but he sent through such notices to his local agents as "Yes, make another attempt to do that."

MW: And that's in your file?

Sennett: That's in my file.

MW: Were they correct that you were under party discipline not to talk to the FBI? Was there a rule not to talk to them, period?

- Sennett: I don't recall that there was such a rule or decision but it was suggested that people refrain from talking to the FBI. This was voluntary and some people felt that there was no harm in doing so. As far as I know, no party member was brought up on charges or expelled for talking to the FBI.
- MW: But presumably the agents were aware of that and that's the reason then that they may have thought that this was a big departure on your part talking to these four guys in the tunnel.
- Sennett: Normally, when the FBI approached somebody, it was done at their home or outside the place of their employment. It was very easy to walk away from them--that's the difference. In my case, I couldn't walk away from them. I would have had to run with four agents in pursuit.
- MW: You weren't afraid that they were going to beat you up or anything?
- Sennett: On no. I thought they were going to arrest me, that's all. But that was not the case. If they had a warrant I wasn't going to walk or run away in any case. They could have had me for the taking.
- MW: They knew where you were all the time now that you were out in the open.
- Sennett: Absolutely, they certainly did.
- MW: What was your feeling during this period generally? Was this a more comfortable period than the underground period?
- Sennett: Very much; I was home. I was able to operate out of my house. I was with my family, and that was very comforting during that period. I obviously felt that the underground operation had been unnecessary and even harmful to the party.

X The 1954 Elections

[Interview 11: April 30, 1982]##

MW: Today we're going to talk about the 1954 elections. How did you get ready for those?

Sennett: By the time the war wound down in Korea, at the end of 1953, there were some indications that international tensions were easing. The Communist party began to discuss the possibilities for a change in the political climate of the country. After the 1952 elections, the Progressive party, which we had helped to build, had been in decline and we decided that we would work to involve our membership in an aggressive preparatory campaign to highlight the issues in the 1954 elections. We decided to focus on work within the Democratic party as we had given up on the Progressive party by that time.

PROGRESSIVE PARTY CONVENTION DECISION REVERSED

MW: Tell me something about that decision. Did you have a lot of arguments about it in the party?

Sennett: There were differences of opinion, but the decline in the Progressive party fortunes was evident in 1952 after the presidential elections in 1948. Even though there was an attempt to run some local candidates for Congress and the state legislature in 1952, it never amounted to very much. There were some reevaluations of that whole period and the decision to launch the Progressive party in the first place. In Illinois, for example, in 1952, the Progressive party state organization was planning to enter candidates in the Democratic party primary. There had been a state convention at which such a decision was actually made.

Bill Miller, the chairman of the party, pushed that strategy as an alternative to fielding an independent Progressive party slate in the general elections.

MW: Was Bill Miller a Communist?

Sennett: Yes, he was a member of the Communist party.

MW: At that time--the '52 and '53 period--did the CP control the Progressive party in Illinois?

Sennett: More so than it had in the past, as the Progressive party lost a large section of its non-Communist support after the Henry Wallace election campaign in 1948.

MW: So it was only the Communists who were left--

Sennett: Not entirely, but the Communists were more committed and stuck it out longer.

MW: Did the Progressive party continue to exist after the decision to switch to the Democratic party?

Sennett: There was a reversal of that decision, due to the intervention of the Illinois State Board of the Communist party. Because of the underground operation by the Communist party leadership, we had no prior opportunity to evaluate the proposed switch in policy by the Progressive party. The change in strategy caught us by surprise, and we thought it was a serious error.

MW: Now, wait a minute, the decision made by the Progressive party convention?

Sennett: That is correct.

MW: To do what?

Sennett: To give up their independent slate in the general elections, to enter candidates in the Democratic primaries.

MW: When was that convention?

Sennett: At the end of 1951. We learned after the convention was over that there had been some division of opinion but that Communist party members believed that the Communist party was in favor of the change in policy. Bill Miller maintained that the Progressive party, having been denied the right to run candidates on its own ticket in 1948, would certainly find it even more difficult to do so in 1952. He felt that local candidates for the state

legislature and Congress could more effectively challenge reactionary candidates in the Democratic party primaries.

Ed Starr was our party's political action director at the time and he conveyed the position of the Communist party board that the Progressive party decision was wrong and would undermine the national campaign of the Progressive party around its candidate for president. It was suggested that we work to get support to call for reconvening the state Progressive party convention to consider reversing its previous action. Bill Miller said he was opposed to that course but he would not fight against that decision [to reconvene]. He would consult with other Progressives who were in favor of reconsideration and go along with reconvening but would personally not take a public decision at the convention itself.

There were some other people in the Progressive party loyal to the CP who said that they would carry the ball, and they brought about a reversal at a smaller reconvening of the Progressive party convention. There was some discussion and, while Bill Miller chaired the meeting, he did not speak on the policy question being reconsidered. There was a very strained and pessimistic atmosphere at the gathering and it was decided not to participate in the Democratic primaries.

- MW: So here was a case of the underground party, which was more or less out of touch with political precinct work, telling this convention that they had made a mistake in forcing the convention to reconvene and reverse themselves.
- Sennett: That is correct. In our board there was some divided opinion about that in any case. But there was no strong case being made for leaving things as they were. Bill Miller, at least, took a principled position and had the most correct attitude in the long run. It wasn't long thereafter that the Progressive party was liquidated.
- MW: That would seem to be a pretty good indication to most people that the Progressive party was controlled by the CP if they didn't know that beforehand.
- Sennett: It may have helped to speed up the process of disintegration of the Progressive party but that was not the major factor.
- MW: Okay, then back to this later decision to work within the Democratic party.
- Sennett: We decided to involve our membership in an aggressive preparatory campaign to highlight the issues in the forthcoming 1954 congressional elections, and there was no question but that we

felt the place to do it was within the Democratic party. We hoped to encourage whatever contacts we had with labor, liberal, community, and black constituencies to play a more active role.

MW: You were still underground at this time?

Sennett: I was not, no. This was in 1953--at the end of 1953--and the underground was not yet liquidated and there were a number of us who were out of the underground, but there was still a shadow underground organization.

MW: How was this decision made?

Sennett: This decision was made, in the main, by those of us who were in the open because the majority of the board was now in the open.

MW: Did Bill Miller take a part in this?

Sennett: Bill Miller was no longer in Illinois. He had moved to Pennsylvania, and the decision was a decision by the Communist party. There was no Progressive party in Illinois to deal with any longer.

MW: It was still active in other parts of the country though--that is, the Wallace movement.

Sennett: I'm not sure about the date, but I don't think that it was active in 1954.

MW: Didn't the IPP continue in California?

Sennett: I think it did. As far as Illinois was concerned, it had never been as strong as the one in California.

MW: This decision, by the way, was strictly an Illinois decision, this was not a national decision?

Sennett: Do you mean for work in the Democratic party?

MW: Yes.

Sennett: No, this was a national decision.

MW: Had both of these decisions been determined by the national leadership first, that is, the first decision to get the Progressive party to reverse itself?

Sennett: No.

MW: It was not?

Sennett: No. In fact, the only state where I can recall that the Progressive party made a decision in 1952 to work in the Democratic primaries was in Illinois. That was not a national decision by the Communist party or the Progressive party. That was one of the reasons we felt uneasy about the new policy.

MW: There was no national line on whether you worked within the Democratic party or not?

Sennett: Yes, the national line of the Communist party through 1952 was to continue to work independently with the Progressive party. There were questions and discussion about changing that policy but that came later.

WORKING WITHIN THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Sennett: I was a member of the Communist party's national political action committee headed by Al Blumberg, a former philosophy professor before becoming a party functionary. Max Gordon, the party's New York State legislative director, and Russ Nixon, the Political Action Director of the United Electrical Workers Union, were also members of the committee.

MW: Didn't he become the editor of the National Guardian later?

Sennett: Yes, he became coeditor along with James Aaronson.

MW: What was the role of the national political action committee?

Sennett: To study and recommend electoral policies and legislative actions and measures. One of the key policies we began to assess at the end of 1952 was our work in the Progressive party and the growing debate about working within the Democratic party. We concluded that in preparation for the 1954 congressional elections we would recommend a shift in policy toward work in support of progressive, anti-McCarthyite candidates in the Democratic party.

MW: Was this switch in policy put into effect in 1954?

Sennett: Yes. It led to the liquidation of the Progressive party. In Illinois we started to implement the new political policy early in 1953. We issued a programmatic statement in the name of the Communist party, printed in pamphlet form, and mailed out thousands of copies to party and nonparty people around the state.

We sent along a cover letter to union locals and community, black, church, and fraternal organizations asking for consideration of our policy statement. We suggested that even though they might disagree with us that they consider the issues involved and help to involve their own membership in the political decisions to be made in 1954.

MW: What did your program propose?

Sennett: In the main, our public policy statement called for the defeat of those members of Congress who were the most rabid warmongers and opponents of peace and for the election of those Illinois congressmen committed to peace. We called for the election of an anti-McCarthy Congress. We suggested that this was the time to begin to get rid of those who were outright McCarthyites and to support those candidates running for Congress and the state legislature who were pledged to ending witch hunts and to restore civil liberties. We called for the election of more Negro (black) and labor representatives at all levels of public office.

Of course, we were not in a very practical position to implement that program. We did feel, however, that we could bring about a discussion among thousands of people with whom our members had contacts in the organizations to which they belonged. We knew we could help to generate discussions about our program that could have some impact in trade unions and other circles.

MW: How strong was the party in the trade unions at that point?

Sennett: Our strength was basically in the independent unions. But it ranged from strong to weak in other CIO and AF of L unions. They were the United Electrical Workers Union, the United Packinghouse Workers Union, and the smaller unions, like the fur and leather workers, and the shoe workers. The left had some support in several steelworkers' locals even though the union leadership was in the hands of those who were anti-Communist. So we did have some handles where such a discussion would be generated.

The campaign for the Senate race was a very interesting one because Paul Douglas, a former Socialist and a professor of economics at the University of Chicago, was the state's Democratic U.S. Senator running for reelection in 1954. Douglas had turned against socialism and became a rabid anti-Communist as well as a hawk on U.S. foreign policy. However, he was labeled a liberal because of his support of New Deal economic measures in Congress. While he had strong labor support, he was far from being a crusader for civil rights and civil liberties, and his rabid anti-Communist position certainly played into the hands of the McCarthyites.

Since we Communists were stressing a peace program and an anti-McCarthy program with which Douglas disagreed, we called for a primary challenge to his candidacy within the Democratic party. Our position was that if such a candidate could be found, it could be an important factor in the election. We felt, however, that a more progressive opponent of Douglas could at least advance the kind of program for peace, an end to the cold war, and program for civil liberties which could challenge Douglas' dangerous program.

MW: Your "position"—do you mean your ideas or your power position?

Sennett: Our people would often say, "What's the use of running a candidate against such a strong incumbent? It isn't going to get you anywhere. The candidate doesn't have a chance to win." Our position was that we know an opponent to Douglas doesn't have a chance to win, but we think that having a truly progressive primary opposition candidate focuses more clearly on the dangerous aspects of Douglas's program. And that candidate could inject precisely those issues that Douglas might avoid discussing in the campaign. His opponent could bring some pressure to bear so that the incumbent might have to modify his position somewhat if the issues were to gain popular support.

MW: Using a candidacy as an educational device?

Sennett: That is right. We summed up that position in our statement by saying, "A candidate who enters the primaries with a platform for peace negotiations, who aggressively challenges McCarthyism and supports a sound labor people's legislative program will make an impact on the issues in the Senate race even though Douglas is the eventual winner." However, no such candidate was forthcoming and Douglas was not challenged in the primaries.

In an article that I wrote for the Sunday Worker, May 30, 1954, after the primary election was won by Douglas, I sharply criticized his Republican opponent, Joseph T. Meek. Douglas sent a blistering five hundred-word telegram to the editor of the Daily Worker protesting my story and our implied support for him. He wanted the record to show that he was anti-Communist, that he was opposed to any implicit or explicit support from us. In my article, I had written that "despite Douglas's blind anti-communism, he was viewed by many as a liberal, pro-labor, anti-McCarthyite Senator." While critical of Douglas's role, I contended that the Republican Meek's election would be a more open victory for McCarthyism. "Thus," I contended, "as between the two, a victory for Douglas was thus an overriding consideration."

MW: Now, when you wrote that, did you have any feeling that that could be the kiss of death for Douglas?

Sennett: No, we didn't think of it in those terms. Obviously, Douglas did.

MW: But why didn't you? Wasn't anybody pretty attuned at that time to the fact that if you could hang the label Communist or soft-on-Communist or Communist-associated on any political personage, you could really do him a lot of damage?

Sennett: In the first place, Douglas's record on communism was pretty open and well known. He didn't have to repudiate our support to establish his anti-Communist credentials. We were making our own position clear, based on objective factors as we saw them. We didn't have the kind of clout at that time to affect the Senate race. And, as matters turned out, our position didn't hurt his campaign.

MW: He must have been afraid that it was going to hurt him.

Sennett: Undoubtedly. He was afraid, obviously, or he would not have sent that telegram. The telegram just repeated his well-known, rabid anti-Communist positions in no uncertain terms.

MW: Was it printed in the Worker?

Sennett: I think the Worker referred to Douglas's telegram but did not print it verbatim.

The results of the elections in 1954 were far from a smashing victory over McCarthyism, yet there were some gains made. They did signal the beginnings of a changing trend in the country and in the kind of candidates who were being elected. There was a softening of the attitudes of a number of people who were elected to office away from the stridency and hysteria of McCarthyism. Actually, it was more like a stiffening of attitudes against McCarthyism, a feeling that the country had gone too far--that a lot of damage had been done.

There was increased representation in Congress of Democrats who agreed that it was necessary to do something about ending repressive legislation and ending witch hunts and further attacks on civil liberties.

WARD ORGANIZATION IN CHICAGO

Sennett: In the 1955 Chicago mayoralty race, Richard J. Daley was elected mayor. He became a major figure in the Democratic party nationally and was commonly referred to as the boss of Chicago's

Democratic party machine. The Chicago Democratic party machine became the strongest in the country after that election, during a period when other old-time big city political machines were in decline. It was unique because of its system of organization, patronage, and control. Daley had been the clerk of Cook County, which includes Chicago, and he was also the chairman of the Cook County Democratic party. In Chicago, the Democratic party held political power through its fifty ward organizations and over forty-one hundred precinct captains.

The city council had fifty members, one council member for each ward. They were elected in their respective wards based on geographic boundaries. Under the two-party system, there were ward committeemen in each party for each ward, with precinct captains reporting to them.

The Democrats were more successful with their ward committee-precinct captain structure because they controlled the city. They had controlled the city since 1932, having been in power for twenty-four years. They were able to provide jobs in city or county government. Practically every precinct captain of the party had a city or county job. Sometimes they had two jobs because in addition to a local government job, some of them held jobs in private industry.

Precinct captains held their jobs to the extent that they could deliver the votes. The ward committeemen held the real power in the city through their control of the precinct captains. While some committeemen might also be aldermen, this was the exception and not the rule. If there was a ward in which the ward committeeman was not an alderman, the ward committeeman held the real power. They had more power than the elected alderman who was a member of the city council.

MW: Did the Communist party in Illinois ever consider infiltrating the Democratic party precinct structure and having Communists act as precinct captains?

Sennett: No, we never thought in those terms. The precinct organizations were machine controlled, and the infiltration of that structure would not, in our opinion, have changed their character, because the ward committeemen appointed the precinct captains. It wasn't as though they had meetings of precinct captains to make decisions or to discuss policy. There was nothing like that at all. The only job of the precinct captain was to turn out the vote and to keep in contact with the voters in his precinct. And the vote had to be turned out and accounted for, whoever was the official candidate decided upon by the Democratic machine.

- MW: But still, as in the case of any political organization, it has key positions. Was there never any consideration given to trying to put Communists in those key positions so you could in effect control the Democratic party machine?
- Sennett: We didn't think that the precinct captains could work as independents within the organization.
- MW: Where was the power?
- Sennett: The power was with the ward committeemen who controlled the precinct captains.
- MW: Then why not become ward committeemen?
- Sennett: To become a ward committeeman, you had to be elected. That was not an appointed job. You had to be elected at the same time there were primary elections. And the precinct captains selected by the incumbent ward committeemen turned out the vote for the ward committeemen.
- MW: Then the precinct captains were very powerful. I mean if they determined who was elected ward committeeman--
- Sennett: It worked from the top the other way around. In the first place, once the ward committeeman was in power, he could fire a precinct captain, change the precinct captain, and the ward committeeman would stack the precinct captains so obviously they were his henchmen working for him.
- MW: Okay, if you wanted to work yourself up to a powerful position in that structure, the first thing to do is to get yourself elected as a ward committeeman, right?
- Sennett: Yes.
- MW: Did the Communist party ever think of trying to do that?
- Sennett: As far as I knew, the Communist party never did. There were no discussions along that line.
- MW: Why not?
- Sennett: The Communist party wasn't just thinking in terms of power for itself or control of the Democratic party organization. It was thinking in terms of where to raise the issues and where to bring these issues to the attention of the masses. You may have a point there, Marshall, but your point was not one that was considered. I do not recall any discussion or proposal any time where the

matter of work within the Democratic party was approached in that manner.

MW: But the whole Leninist theory of the party as the vanguard also involves the notion of front organizations and penetration of mass organizations, and I don't know whether you would call the Democratic party a mass organization in Leninist terms or not, but it would seem to me that a party which is interested in seizing power would look at the Democratic party as very vulnerable to penetration in the same way that they would look at trade unions as vulnerable to penetration, and it's unusual that they wouldn't do that.

Sennett: Where there were independent Democratic clubs, and there were some, members of the Communist party who were active in them did work to try to influence them. But they were very few in number. And they did not affect the Democratic machine because that machine was all powerful. The machine and the club did not mix.

CHICAGO'S MAYORAL RACE OF 1955

Sennett: In any case, the Illinois district board of the party, with my concurrence, adopted a cockeyed position on the 1955 mayoralty elections--

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MW: You were just talking about some "cockeyed policy!"

Sennett: Yes, it was based on the rationale of linkage to the upcoming 1956 presidential election.

MW: Now, that work "linkage"--is that a current term you are using?

Sennett: To some extent. We used to say "link up." I think, frankly, we pioneered that term. We used to "link" everything.

MW: Did you used to say linkage?

Sennett: We said linkage; we said, link up. We used that phrase and the concept quite often. We "linked" the elections of 1955 with the national elections of 1956. We said they could not be separate. It was not just a local election, it was an election that was tied into the whole national political picture.

MW: So the term linkage referred to some kind of interrelationship between two political processes.

Sennett: That is correct. I wrote an article for the Communist party's theoretical and political monthly magazine, Political Affairs, summarizing the city election results. I stated that Chicago's municipal primary and general elections campaign revealed important national trends affecting the issues, tactics, and alignments in the momentous elections of 1956. Now, with that line of thinking, we, the Communist party--

MW: Now, wait a minute, you were talking about the upcoming 1956--

Sennett: I was writing this in 1955.

MW: The summer of '55.

Sennett: In summarizing the 1955 Chicago elections I dealt with our political policy and the strategy that we adopted then. We decided to help elect Richard Daley as Chicago's mayor despite the fact that his opponent was a liberal. Daley's victory further entrenched and solidified the Democratic party machine. There is no doubt that a Republican victory in Chicago would have given that party greater strength locally and nationally. But even without that victory, Eisenhower won the presidential elections overwhelmingly. In the Chicago elections we failed to see the greater damage a Daley victory was to do to the development of electoral independence. Our strategy was wrong.

MW: What strategy?

Sennett: The strategy of linking the specific circumstances and nuances of the Chicago mayoralty elections to the fate of the Democratic party nationally.

MW: In other words, you failed to see the wisdom of backing a Republican. Is that what you mean?

Sennett: Yes. The Republican candidate, Robert E. Merriam, had been a Democrat and the nonlabor liberals and reform elements in the city broke with the traditional coalition around the Democratic party and backed Merriam for mayor.

MW: And the CP simply didn't consider that at all?

Sennett: No, we did not.

MW: Mainly because of the McCarthyism issue?

Sennett: Primarily. We did not consider Merriam as an individual. We thought of him as embracing the Republicans and thus strengthening the party of McCarthyism. To us, the main danger in 1956 was the victory of the Republican party. The city elections had to take a back seat.

The Republicans chose a liberal strategy for the elections in Chicago by slating Robert Merriam for mayor on their ticket. Merriam was the fifth ward's alderman for the district encompassing the neighborhood of Hyde Park and the University of Chicago. Like his father, he had been a professor at the University of Chicago. Merriam knew that the Democratic machine would not support him as their candidate and he was eagerly accepted by moderate Republicans as their candidate.

Governor William G. Stratton was able to impose Merriam on the GOP's old guard because it was clear--even to them--that a right-wing reactionary Republican was doomed to defeat. The history of the Republican challenges since 1932 was proof positive of that over and over again.

Merriam was a member of the Independent Voters of Illinois, the state affiliate of Americans for Democratic Action. He had considerable support among good government and civic groups, but no significant backing from unions and blacks. As a member of the city council, Merriam was at odds with the Democratic machine on budgetary matters, inadequate public transportation, poor city services, graft, crime, and corruption. On many of these issues he had the support of members of the Communist party who were working in the labor movement and in the people's organizations. He evoked New York's mayor Fiorello LaGuardia as an example of the kind of coalition that he wanted to build in Chicago. He even called it Chicago's fusion movement, the name used by LaGuardia for the fusion ticket that he led of Democrats, Republicans, and independents in New York City.

Merriam proposed to weld such a movement in Chicago and we chided him for it. In our overriding concern for the national link in the elections, we failed to recognize the greater advantages that might have accrued by dealing a crippling blow to the Democratic political machine.

MW: Do you think you had the muscle to deliver a crippling blow; that is, had you sided with Merriam, could you have dumped Daley?

Sennett: No, we would not have had enough muscle. The final vote showed the Communist party could not turn out the needed numbers of votes by itself, but at least if we had taken such a position, it could have influenced some other people, especially in the left-led trade

unions, and it would have strengthened our ties with other liberal forces. Our position didn't gain anything as a result of the support that we gave to the Democratic candidate. We lost some allies without gaining any friends.

MW: Would you say that decisions during this period were the result of ideological concerns more than hard political analysis?

Sennett: Basically, they were. They flowed from what was most important in the international situation and from what would follow nationally. Local considerations were always subordinate to those two, and since we had decided that McCarthyism on a national scale had to be defeated and that the instrumentality for making the change from McCarthyism would be at that point work within the Democratic party, it could be best accomplished by ignoring independent challenges in local situations that might have a bearing on our national line.

RECONCILING LOCAL ISSUES WITH INTERNATIONAL POLICY

MW: Have you ever reflected on that--I know you have reflected on it--but is there anything inherently wrong with beginning your political analysis from the position of deciding what is good for humanity and the world first and then working backward to what's good locally, as opposed to starting locally? I mean, obviously, an internationalist movement that is concerned with peace and the welfare of humanity has to begin thinking there. But that process seems to have led you to a lot of disasters. Have you reflected on what principles one might deduce from that experience?

Sennett: Having left the Communist party now twenty-five years ago I have had a lot of time to do a lot reflecting about that. But when I was in the Communist party, there was not always that kind of reflection. From time to time, some of us would talk about such concerns. We would talk about where society was going, where humanity was going, but mainly those were impersonal discussions. They were not in the course of organized political meetings and conferences.

MW: But my point is, you seem to be saying that you made some serious practical errors in Chicago during this period, that you could have advanced your concerns better had you made some other decisions, and that you made those in large measure because you were somewhat blinded by ideology and policy that was international in scope. Now, we have a situation where we have a nuclear freeze movement prompted by the concerns of large numbers

of people about world peace, and many people are going to take their positions on local political contests on the basis of how candidates stand on the nuclear freeze issue and the atom bomb issue and world peace issues. So, in essence, it's kind of a parallel situation to what you pursued at that time. Does your experience of the 50s suggest that it is a mistake for people today to make their decisions about local candidates on the basis of where they stand on international issues?

Sennett: Sometimes. I think that each case has to be considered in the context of the particular issue or issues of the time. Local considerations may, at times, have to take priority. On the other hand, some national or international issues may have to be given overriding consideration. In the matter of the 1955 Chicago elections, Merriam had a better program and he wasn't just a demagogue making campaign promises. He had been fighting City Hall as an independent councilman for a progressive program in the main. While we didn't always agree with him on a number of issues we had more in common with him than we did with Daley and the Democratic hacks. Taking that into account and considering the issues that he was raising in the mayoralty campaign, we should have been on his side. We failed to grasp the potential of the antimachine victory and its implications, had Merriam won. And that could have led to important grassroots changes within the Democratic party. The Democratic machine would have been very severely weakened—crippled—and could have been restructured on a more open, more democratic basis. There is no telling which way Merriam would have gone, but at least initially his victory would have benefitted those independent forces who were opposed to corrupt machine politics in the Democratic and Republican parties. And there could have been greater numbers involved in decision making in Chicago's political life.

FURTHER DISCUSSION OF THE MAYORAL RACE

Sennett: Prior to Daley's nomination, the Democratic party machine had been prepared to reslate the incumbent mayor, Martin Kennelly, for a third term. After eight years of turmoil in the city and great dissatisfaction by labor, blacks, and liberals with Kennelly's record as mayor, there was a strong demand by this coalition to dump him. A revolt was brewing against the mayor, who was the favorite of big business and the Chicago Tribune in the city. Delegations were then sent to see those who were going to be the Democratic slate makers from labor unions, and AFL-CIO, Independents, black organizations, churches, community groups, civil bodies, and so on. They said they did not want to see another Kennelly

candidacy. What they failed to do was to make specific proposals for alternate names and alternate candidates. If, for example, there could have been a demand for or a hint that they would make a demand for Merriam or somebody like Merriam, then this of course would have been a much more positive development.

Initially the regular Democrats were planning to reslate Kennelly. As far as they were concerned, Kennelly was not good or too bad. It didn't mean much to them. They had control, they had power, and they had jobs. Graft and corruption in the city enriched many politicians and their families and friends. Whoever was the Democratic nominee would continue all that. They were satisfied to go along with Kennelly but they had to give in to the demands by the spokespeople for their base that Kennelly had to go. Without a popular movement for a popular candidate the slate makers chose Richard J. Daley, who already was a power as the chairman of the Cook County Democratic Central Committee.

Kennelly had the support of the banking and business interests and several Democratic ward organizations in the more affluent neighborhoods, and he remained in the primary race. Further confusion was caused in Democratic ranks when Benjamin Adamowski, a former state attorney general and a maverick in his own right, decided to run in the mayoral Democratic primary. To some liberals and Communists, Adamowski looked like a good independent candidate and a better progressive bet than Daley. They thought that Adamowski could be the Democratic party's answer to Merriam's Republican candidacy--independent, liberal, and antimachine.

However, since Daley had already been slated by the regular party organization, labor and black support had already been committed to him. Adamowski's candidacy, in practice, would have taken away votes from Daley with the consequence of a possible victory for the least desirable candidate in a three-man race, Kennelly.

Though McCarthyism had suffered some defeats in the 1954 elections and was now being more openly challenged, it was far from dead. But the complete absence of Red-baiting in the city elections was not due so much to the fact that McCarthyism had abated as it was in large measure to the fact that both parties were vying for the liberal vote and Red-baiting in that election could have had a negative effect on whichever candidate would have been involved in such campaign tactics.

The issue of what was then called Negro representation was an important pioneering contribution made by the Communist party.

MW: Do you mean the idea that there ought to be black candidates?

Sennett: Yes, that blacks were discriminated against in holding political offices. The Communist party had for many years put forward the need for black candidates. It sloganized and educated and, within its own ranks, promoted blacks to leadership. In mass organizations, CP members would pose the question of discrimination and representation in a very practical way so that broader masses of people began to take up the issue of Negro representation.

In 1954, for example, Illinois had a population of about nine million people with approximately 8 percent of that number being black. Chicago had 3,600,000 people and a black population of approximately 17 percent in that year. In the state, blacks numbered one out of twenty-five congressmen, one out of fifty-one state senators, and four out of 153 state representatives. In Chicago, with a 17 percent black population, only three of fifty city council members [were black].

In our public statement on the 1954 elections, we spelled out those areas where, because of a black majority in particular districts alone, blacks should be slated to run and could win. We pointed out, for example, that there were eight wards with a majority black population and with only three black city council people. There were five additional wards where blacks were close to a majority and their city council members were white.

In the campaign against Mayor Kennelly blacks played a key role. They expressed their resentment about the repeated racist violence against blacks who were moving into private and public housing. They blasted Kennelly for the deteriorating situation in public schools, in hospitals, and for discrimination in public places, in employment, and in insurance costs. They demanded that steps be taken to insure that there be state fair employment practices legislation.

Two more blacks were elected to the city council as a result of the 1955 municipal races. This made a total of five black members, increasing their representation to 10 percent.

The dominant slogan of Merriam and the GOP in their campaign against Daley was "defeat the machine." But the Communist party, while critical of the machine, supported Daley, rationalizing that the main danger was a victory by the Republican party regardless of who the candidate was and regardless of his record and program.

MW: Was there any dissent that you recall from supporting Daley and the machine?

Sennett: Yes, there was. There was disagreement and some dissent by a few people. But there was no formal challenge of that policy. There were no votes taken, and no single organizational unit called for a change in strategy. In the course of discussions on the elections there were some people who felt that it was wrong to oppose Merriam. There were several who advocated supporting Adamowski in the primary race.

MW: There was no dialogue in party publications on the question?

Sennett: No, there was not. When the election was held, over 1,300,000 votes were cast. Daley received 54 percent of the vote for mayor to Merriam's 46 percent with a plurality of 127,000. This was the smallest margin that a Democratic mayoralty candidate had rolled up in twenty-four years. And it was low compared with the Democratic vote in a previous election where the party candidates rolled up a 390,000-vote plurality.

The press of Chicago, which supported Merriam, wrote that Daley's election was largely due to bribery, habit, or unthinking allegiance. The machine vote obviously did turn out the largest numbers, we could tell, from those wards where the machine was the strongest and was dominant. But the winning plurality was essentially cast by the overwhelming support of black voters, with over eighty percent of them voting for Daley.

MW: Did you do careful statistical analyses of the election and relate the voting figures to census tract data, things of that nature, so you would have accurate data about how various groups were voting in the city?

Sennett: Yes, we had the results. I don't know how accurate all of our studies were but we did read the stats ward by ward and even precinct by precinct. We were able to know, obviously, where the votes came from and we could compare the demographics in communities and political subdivisions.

MW: Were you getting any help from social scientists in the university community for election analysis and things of that nature?

Sennett: We did to the extent that they were members or friendly to the CP. We had some people with professional experience who were helpful.

MW: [laughs] I won't ask you who they were!

Sennett: In the 1956 elections, the Eisenhower administration won with a great majority, while the Democratic machine under Daley's leadership in Chicago became more and more powerful and more corrupt in city and national affairs. Despite the fact that in

justifying our support of Daley we talked about the concessions that Daley would make to the people's movement, as we put it, the record shows that the biggest beneficiaries in Chicago were the big banks and the corporate interests who were aligned with Republicans nationally. They became Daley's strongest backers and in subsequent elections they even supported him. Even the Republican Chicago Tribune eventually endorsed Daley as their favorite candidate.

The claim has been made that Chicago in these days of troubled cities has been a city that worked and that it worked because of Mayor Richard J. Daley's leadership. That was true to the extent that it worked for the Democratic machine and for the financial, industrial, and real estate interests who were its chief beneficiaries.

MW: Was there a lot of public discussion of the fact that the Communist party was backing Daley in the election?

Sennett: No, there was not. As I indicated, there was an absence of Red-baiting and no reference to our position. We did not make an open endorsement of Daley. We rationalized the reason for our support and we encouraged people to back his candidacy.

MW: In your publications?

Sennett: It should have been clear from what we wrote in our publications.

In closing this session I'd like to mention the Smith Act indictment which the Department of Justice and the FBI was preparing against me.

MW: We only have about two minutes on this tape.

Sennett: The Smith Act, which was passed in 1940, was used as the basis for a plan to indict me and a number of other members of the Communist party in Illinois on the grounds that it could be proved that we had committed a conspiracy to teach and advocate the overthrow of the government by force and violence. But this was never completed, and none of us in Illinois, with the exception of Claude Lightfoot, was ever indicted under the Smith Act. Lightfoot was chosen by the Department of Justice as a test case under the membership section of that act.

After leaving the Communist party in 1958, I was dropped as a candidate for indictment in 1961 as a result of actions by the Supreme Court eventually voiding many of the Smith Act convictions.

MW: Shall we put on the other tape?

Sennett: No, I've finished.

XI: Revelations of the Twentieth Party Congress

[Interview 12: August 26, 1982]##

MW: We are going to discuss the effect on your views of Nikita Khrushchev's famous speech--in which he told the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist party about the crimes of the Stalin era. How did that affect you, Bill?

Sennett: That year was a turning point for me in my lifetime--

MW: That was 1956.

AMERICAN AND CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY REACTIONS

Sennett: Soviet leader Khrushchev's special report to the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist party dealing with the subject that he called the cult of the individual was the most shocking revelation that I have ever read or heard about in my life and it haunts me to this day. I was told, along with thousands of my American comrades, that the man I had so revered, the man I considered a genius, a great humanitarian, the exemplar of socialist man, was a criminal.

In his report, Khrushchev said that Stalin had absolute power over the party and the government, that he was paranoid, caused hundreds of thousands of innocent people to be arrested and tens of thousands of them to be executed. Stalin violated Soviet laws, party statutes, the Soviet constitution, with impunity.

MW: Did you believe this right away when you first heard it?

Sennett: I was so shocked I don't know whether there was belief or disbelief, but the shock obviously led me to consider the validity of the special report. It was hard for me to believe at first, but I had to give it some credence.

MW: Do you remember where you first saw it?

Sennett: I saw the New York Times text of the speech. In fact, they got hold of it and I believe they printed it before the Daily Worker did. The Daily Worker also printed it.

MW: So when you read that text, you pretty much accepted it as genuine? You didn't think it was an American CIA plot or something of that nature.

Sennett: There were already some signals before the report was printed that something special was going on in the Soviet Union. There were news items indicating that some people who had previously been arrested and had been falsely accused were being released. There was, for example, a so-called doctor's plot. It was shown later that Stalin had instigated the frame-up of a group of Jewish doctors. After his death and prior to the Khrushchev report, the charges against the arrested doctors were quashed. We didn't have much detailed information but there were hints in the Soviet press about other violations of the law under Stalin and KGB chief Beria. They were small signals hinting about greater exposure to come. But I wasn't able to comprehend the world-shaking nature and indictment of the Stalin regime which was yet to come with the special report by Khrushchev.

MW: Now, the Khrushchev report confirmed almost completely and, in fact, went even further in its allegations of what Stalin did than some of the reports of the most hostile anti-Communists and the Trotskyists, things that they had been saying for years and which American Communists had denied and were now in effect confirmed by the Khrushchev speech. So how did that affect your attitude toward the critics of Stalinism and toward the Trotskyists?

Sennett: There was a process of awakening and comprehension. It didn't occur to me all at once. Obviously there was great shock and sadness. For twenty-five years I had accepted the Soviet Union as a society which would become a model for a new world of social concern, of compassion, humanism and greater democracy. And, in my eyes, Stalin was a genius, leading the Soviet Union and inspiring the world socialist movement. Initially, I was more confused and shocked than clarified. The report raised more questions for me than were answered. Unlike some of my comrades I was not defensive, I was confused. I had to reread the Khrushchev report over and over again. I had to think things through a lot more

carefully than I had in the past. I talked with a lot of my comrades and with people outside of the Communist party to try to get their thinking, to ask questions, to listen, and to reevaluate much of what I had previously accepted as valid in Marxist-Leninist theory and practice.

MW: Do you recall anyone in the party, any of your associates saying, "Look, this isn't true. Something has gone wrong. Khrushchev has made a mistake. Let's wait and find out. We really can't believe this." Did anybody ever take that line?

Sennett: Oh, yes, in fact, when the Khrushchev report first appeared, [there was] some question as to whether this wasn't just a State Department ploy. Some said, "This may have been dreamed up by the CIA. Let's wait until we actually get more information from our Soviet comrades about the validity of the report. It will have to be verified." Some party members speculated that the printed version of the report was an exaggeration of what had probably been a critical evaluation of some mistakes made by the past leadership. There was a feeling that there could well have been criticism of mistakes made by Beria and other members of the party leadership but not of Stalin--that was going too far.

MW: Were you aware at the time that the Chinese Communist party--which was the largest Communist party outside of the Soviet Union at that time, or at least it was a fraternal party in one of the largest countries in the world--was still, at least as far as everybody knew, on friendly terms with the Soviet Union?

Sennett: Yes.

MW: The Chinese refused to accept this report and they just stonewalled it. Was the American party, or were you, aware of what the Chinese attitude toward this was at that time?

Sennett: Not initially. As with many other party members, probably the majority, I was jolted and questioning the American party's policies, structure, and tactics as a result of its decisions during the cold war period. Khrushchev's report in 1956 helped us to look inward at our own party in the United States.

MW: The party members that you worked with, you didn't see any evidence of polarization of the party at this time among those who might take a more Chinese type of approach to it versus those who were willing to accept at face value what Khrushchev said?

Sennett: No, the schism between the Chinese and the Russians had not yet taken place. The first public response by the Communist party of China, after acknowledging Khrushchev's criticism of the "cult of the individual," was "let a hundred flowers bloom. . ." But what I

did notice, of course, is that in the U.S., people whom I came later to call hard-liners became very defensive and said, "Trust the Soviet Union; the facts will out." Later on, of course, they suggested that this was not something that should be discussed publicly. But obviously the New York Times had already gone public. And this was soon followed by the Daily Worker.

MW: "Trust the Soviet Union"—did that mean trust the Khrushchev version or trust the Soviet Union to resolve whatever problems may arise from that version of the facts?

Sennett: Khrushchev—as long as he was the leader of the party—spoke for the Soviet Union. There was no attempt to divide Khrushchev from the rest of the party.

MW: So Khrushchev was the Soviet Union; whatever he said was the Soviet position and you'd accept that without question?

Sennett: That's right, that's the way the system operated

REEXAMINING EARLIER ASSUMPTIONS

MW: Okay, so what then happened?

Sennett: This, of course, led to a whole period of change. In reading the Khrushchev report we were amazed at the examples given of criminal actions undertaken by Stalin and in the slavish complicity of many of his underlings. The man who replaced Stalin in power, Khrushchev, summed up all of the crimes and all of the charges against Stalin as simply that of "the cult of the individual," and this was unbelievable to me from the very beginning. I could not conceive of how a party, which was supposed to be a collective organization, in which power was supposedly shared, could end up with a dictator who was then blamed for usurping power and whose demise alone would restore "Soviet democracy." The whole state was bureaucratized, the Soviet leadership did Stalin's bidding, the whole system was corrupted. A lot more people were involved in the crimes that Khrushchev enumerated than Stalin, Beria, and the limited number mentioned in his report. The whole Soviet judicial, legislative, and administrative system was culpable. And the Soviet Communist party which spawned Stalin and Stalinism needed to be revamped from top to bottom.

MW: Bill, are you familiar with the official biography of Stalin which was published and distributed during the Stalin period, authorized by Stalin, and was available in all of the left-wing bookstores in this country, a little well-bound book?

Sennett: Yes, that was a book by Karl Radek.

MW: Did you ever read that?

Sennett: Yes, I read that book.

MW: When you read that book, did you really accept what was in that book?

Sennett: I was not repelled and repulsed by it at the time. I thought Stalin was the greatest man in the world and I was also infected with the virus of adulation that had developed around Stalin.

MW: The language in that book is so flowery, so extreme. It described Stalin as a demagogue--I mean a demigod really. It seems to me--now, I don't know how it would appear to someone in that party at that period--but it seems to me, just looking at the language of that book, that it's so extreme that nobody could possibly be such a great person and it would cast some suspicion on the authorship of the book and of the government that put it out. You never had that reaction?

Sennett: I must admit that as far as my own conditioning was concerned, I didn't give much thought to the fawning language. I looked upon it as a book which dealt with the outstanding role that Stalin played and I accepted the florid phrases as the writer's expression of adulation. You must remember that as Communists, there was a certain conditioning developed as part of an international movement. Stalin's aura, his image, was heroic to us. We looked upon him as a wise, far-seeing world leader. It was difficult to think of being critical of Stalin. Though I sometimes felt a little awkward and embarrassed by Soviet movies and books glorifying Stalin to excess, I thought it understandable.

MW: I have looked at some of the textbooks in social science that are used in this country, describing the American experience and the greatness of this country and some of its leaders, and while I have never seen anything quite that extreme, there is also in American literature an enormous amount of excessive adulation of the American experience, which none of us really bothered to question very much because we were pretty much committed to the system. I suppose the same sort of phenomenon takes place when you are in a movement like the Communist, so that in the back of your mind you may say, "Well, that's maybe laying it on a little bit heavy, but so what?" At the moment, it's not particularly important to raise any question about it.

Sennett: I think you've put your finger on it. I remember seeing a Soviet film about World War II. I was a little bit squeamish about a number of the scenes--and I was a Stalinist at the time--in which Stalin wisely decided everything brought to his attention. He even knew when true lovers should decide to marry. I remember talking to a couple of my associates in the leadership about the movie, who were a little critical about my tendency to view the film in "petty bourgeois" terms.

MW: That's interesting. As a matter of fact, I think in Khrushchev's speech he refers to that film and criticizes it.

Let me interrupt you once more. Did you or did anyone think at that time that it would be very important to send somebody to the Soviet Union to find out what was going on?

Sennett: There were some tenuous contacts with the Soviet Union then.

MW: Was Foster then head of the party?

Sennett: Foster and Dennis headed the party in 1956.

MW: William Z. Foster?

Sennett: Yes, but Foster was ill at that time and there was a period in which Communists could not get passports in order to travel. This was particularly true of the early 50s.

MW: Did anything happen like this, namely that Foster gets on the phone and calls Moscow and gets some backgrounding on this and then speaks privately to leaders of the party around the country telling them what his views are? Did that sort of thing happen?

Sennett: I don't know whether he spoke to anybody in Moscow or whether any other party leaders did, but when the speech was printed, there was such an uproar in the U.S. party that Foster or Dennis's views were not the issue. The most important thing for party people was "is this speech valid?" Was it really made? How was Stalin able to get away with it? Moscow was not answering the questions raised by the speech.

MW: The party must have accepted that it was in fact true because you said that they published it in the Daily Worker.

Sennett: Oh, yes, they did. In fact, prior to publication in the New York Times and Daily Worker, there was a special closed meeting of the CP's national committee at which the speech was read. But the rest of the membership didn't know about it--I didn't know about it until I read the text in the New York Times. Only after the publication by the Times and the Daily Worker was there a

beginning of open discussions throughout the party. The speech was thus acknowledged as a believable document.

MW: I don't recall. Did other parties around the world put that kind of stamp of authenticity on it? The Soviets have never published the speech.

Sennett: The Soviet Communist party circulated the speech for discussion at party meetings, but they didn't print it in any of their newspapers at the time.

MW: Do you know whether the Daily Worker was the only party that ever published it?

Sennett: No, I don't recall exactly which parties did. I believe it was published in England, Australia, Italy, and several other Communist parties in 1956. Various parties took differing positions in their particular country. As long as they didn't get the go ahead from the Soviet Union, a number of Communist parties did not go out on a limb to publish the speech.

MW: The American party has the reputation of having been one of the more servile parties, in the sense that it was not like the Italian party in sort of going off on its own developing new doctrine and theory but waiting around like the French party to find out what the line is. But this is an indication that that was not the case, at least on this particular issue as far as you know; that is, they went ahead and published it without getting authorization to do so. Is that your impression?

Sennett: That's true, but I think the American party's reputation that it is the most servile of parties particularly took hold only after 1957. I don't think they were much different. They were not the most creative party in the world such as the Italians had been with the kind of leadership and broad movement that they had. In the main, the mass movements, the large parties in industrialized countries like those in France and Italy might be more likely to take actions which were not necessarily first sanctioned by the Soviet Union. But the party in this country, though it may have been servile in the past, was more explosive in its reaction when the Khrushchev report became known. There was a greater demand for answers, for basic reevaluations, and basic changes and eventually a greater exodus from the Communist party of the United States than in any like party anywhere else in the world.

ACCUMULATION OF INCIDENTS STRAIN FAITH

Sennett: My own blind faith in the Soviet Union and Communist leadership in the past had prevented me from seeing the many sides of objective reality. But the Khrushchev speech and subsequent thought, discussions, and study, along with developments that followed, shattered that faith in me.

MW: But you had never had this kind of reaction before with reference to the Nazi-Soviet pact or the Yugoslav controversy or anything of that nature. You had always sort of gone down the line?

Sennett: Yes, but I did have some misgivings and doubts in the past. I was uneasy about the Nazi-Soviet pact, I felt that I did not have access to the information that made such a strategic move necessary. But, in retrospect I feel that even now I don't know whether the Soviet Union had any other alternative than to do what it did because it thought that it was gaining time in order to prepare against the eventual onslaught of Hitler. Khrushchev contended that Stalin was blind to the fact that the Nazis would eventually attack the Soviet Union, and, therefore, did not use the time to prepare for the Nazi invasion.

Whenever I was in doubt about Soviet actions I would rationalize that I didn't have access to the information the Russians had. I would argue that they could see things more clearly than I as they had a proven leadership grounded in scientific Marxist understanding. I accepted and deferred to those who I thought knew more than I did.

MW: But that all stopped with the Khrushchev speech?

Sennett: Well, it certainly was an abrupt end to that kind of rationalization and a beginning of greater independent thought on my part. I had functioned as a secondary leader in the party and rarely questioned its major policies or its political "line."

The Khrushchev report helped to open the door to greater independent thinking and democratic debate in the Communist movement. However, many of us felt that he ignored a fundamental analysis of the Soviet system which made it possible for Stalin to build a personal dictatorship. This was basic to all our questions about the need for change in the Soviet Union and in the Communist party in our own country. Very few people initially accepted the characterization made by Khrushchev that Stalinism was an aberration resulting from "the cult of personality." We asked what made the cult of the personality possible? How was it possible that a supposedly democratic political organization and a collective government leadership

could spawn and tolerate a dictatorship and be helpless in the face of the crimes of that dictatorship until the death of the dictator?

Those were among the grave doubts that were raised initially. The hard-liners like William Z. Foster and his supporters denied that the Soviet system was flawed, even after conceding that Khrushchev's speech was legitimate. They latched onto the position set forth by Khrushchev that it was the cult of the individual that was responsible for Soviet "errors" and a correction had already taken place.

MW: So their position, the "cult of the individual" position as you understood it, was simply a scapegoating technique. Stalin was an aberration and one man was responsible for all of it. He was an evil man, but the system itself was okay?

Sennett: If one reads the speeches made at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist party there was no debate on Khrushchev's special report and none that we know of after the congress. The leadership said in effect: We now have everything in hand. We are going to correct all of the mistakes that were made in the past, and we are marching forward on the road to communism. As a result, there was no indication that there was going to be any further examination of the problems that may have been created. They would say, Everything is going to be corrected; the injustices that were in existence that took place because of the leadership of Stalin are going to be righted. [telephone call interruption]

It was clear from the outset of Khrushchev's exposure at the Congress that corrective steps in the Soviet Communist party and in government would be limited. It was to be an internal party matter, primarily for the leadership. There was not to be a public investigation. There was not to be an opening of the archives on Stalin's crimes. Khrushchev told the Congress, which excluded foreign delegates from the special session, and here I quote: "We cannot let this matter get out of the party, especially not to the press. We should know the limits. We should not give ammunition to the enemy. We should not wash our dirty linen before their eyes."

MW: That was in the speech itself?

Sennett: Yes, that was part of the speech itself. Despite Khrushchev's admonitions about keeping matters quiet, there were inevitable leaks, rumors, and growing speculation about the explosive domestic developments revealed at the Twentieth Congress. Some open criticism of Stalin appeared in various Soviet publications, and public discussion was begun in the American Communist party in March of 1956. However, the bombshell itself, Khrushchev's secret

speech, was only released for publication by the United States State Department on June 4th.

Prior to that publication of Khrushchev's speech, limited information was received about the erroneous glorification of the cult of the individual and certain "excesses and distortions" under Stalin. This had appeared in some areas of the Soviet press, but the Khrushchev report opened up the widest public discussion and debate in the American Communist party.

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Sennett: Yes, the party opened up the pages of the Daily Worker to the widest freewheeling opinions on all sides of the issues. There were the defenders of Stalin, those who were strongly critical of Stalin and the current Soviet leadership for not going far enough, and the mildly critical forces in the middle. Prior to the Khrushchev revelation, I had been very dogmatic in my support and justification of the party line and of every facet of Soviet policy. I rejected the allegations of the Trotskyists that there was a bureaucratic dictatorship in the Soviet Union that had betrayed Marxism and Leninism. I considered stories about Soviet forced labor camps and other forms of repression as inventions and outright lies by the enemies of socialism. When I was surprised and puzzled by some Soviet actions like the trials, confessions, and executions of a number of party, government, and military leaders, the German-Soviet pact, the expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform [Communist Information Bureau], I considered my doubts to be a weakness in my own thinking and understanding. I had blind faith. I trusted the Soviet Union implicitly and I believed that Stalin and even the American party leadership had a better understanding of what was in the best interests of the masses than I did.

LENINIST DOCTRINE RECONSIDERED

Sennett: The shattering impact of Khrushchev's indictment against Stalin hit me even harder when I realized that there was a lot more involved than simply the aberration of one man. Khrushchev's conclusions were too limited. He simply advised the party that it could correct the damage done by Stalin by, first, eradicating the cult of the individual; second, continuing the practice begun since Stalin's death of Leninist principles of collective party leadership; and, third, restore the Leninist principles of Soviet Socialist democracy, as expressed in its constitution.

MW: You still had faith that Leninist doctrine was democratic?

Sennett: Yes, I did. At that point, I considered that Leninist doctrine was betrayed by Stalin. But I was dismayed by the three points outlined by Khrushchev in his speech, in terms of what to do to correct the errors of the past.

MW: What do you feel about Leninist doctrine now?

Sennett: I feel that there is a lot of validity to Leninist doctrine, particularly as it pertains to the Russian revolution in the Soviet Union. I feel that there was a lot in Leninist doctrine that was not applicable to the rest of the world.

MW: But is it a democratic doctrine?

Sennett: I do not believe that it is a democratic doctrine of structure in the long run. I believe that it was a necessary doctrine--necessary in the Soviet Union for the period of civil war and revolution.

MW: Do you think that any of the responsibility for what happened in the Soviet Union--namely the emergence of Stalin as a dictator--can be laid at the door of Leninist doctrine?

Sennett: Oh, certainly. I think that the format for making it all possible, despite Lenin's indicated displeasure with Stalin as an individual, is in the kind of the structure of organization that Lenin created and that Lenin espoused.

MW: Would you say that for a developing country today with rather primitive social and political institutions that Leninist doctrine would be a useful doctrine for them to follow in setting up a new state?

Sennett: Under certain circumstances it could apply, with some modifications, to developing countries.

MW: Do you still believe that the class analysis that comes from Marx and was further elaborated by Lenin is the most meaningful analysis of political processes?

Sennett: Yes, I do. That is why I consider myself a Socialist today. I believe that with many modifications, not simply bringing it up-to-date, that socialism is relevant and a necessary system in the progressive and democratic development of mankind.

MW: If you stripped Leninism of concepts like democratic centralism, would you say that essentially it is a valid and useful intellectual tool for political organization today?

Sennett: Many of the concepts that have been used by the Communist parties of the world are in the process of change. But changes are also taking place in Socialist parties. Democratic socialist/communist movements have rejected Leninist and even Marxist concepts that have proven to be detrimental to the advancement of democracy.

MW: How about the notion of the professional revolutionary party? Does that make sense?

Sennett: I don't think it makes sense for the United States.

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Sennett: After rereading the Khrushchev special report several times, I was even more unhappy with its simplisitic generalizations. Khrushchev contended that the central committee of the party had correctly analyzed and presented the problem growing out of one-man rule in all of its ramifications.

There was no call for the masses to get involved, for the opening up of the archives, for bold changes in leadership that had failed to speak out against Stalin or for those who had complied with his murderous practices. There was no call for an overhaul of party statutes and the judicial, legislative, and executive system of government which in one way or another failed to act as barriers to Stalin's evil dictatorship.

All of these concerns and the weaknesses of the American CP tore the Communist party apart for the next two years, and they were to affect Communist-controlled countries as well as Communist parties around the world.

Needless to say, the debate over the meaning of the Khrushchev report dominated the thinking and the discussion of the American Communist party until the national convention which was held early in February of 1957. In Illinois, the Communist party had very few defenders of Stalin, although there were a number who agreed with Khrushchev that we should not wash our dirty linen in public. There were no factions initially, but there were many questions and lots of speculation about the course of Soviet party policy and the direction of the American Communists.

MW: How did you feel about the washing of dirty linen in public question?

Sennett: I felt it should be brought out into the open, that that was the only way in which the problems could be properly aired. I was hoping that the Soviet people would have the opportunity to become involved in a mass discussion about their party, their government, and their leadership. As for American Communists, we needed an

awakening to deal with the reality of our growing isolation, and we needed to chart a new independent democratic path to socialism. Among all members of the Illinois board, I was probably the most vocal critic of the Khrushchev report's conclusion. At one of our meetings, Jim West, who was then the party organizer in Ohio, chided me for negative thinking about Soviet intentions. It was not for us, he said, to second-guess the Soviet Communist party, and, as for himself, he had faith in the Soviet Union and faith in its collective leadership. He said they knew better than anyone else where the truth lay and what course of action had to be taken.

Our discussion ranged from how and why the cult of Stalin occurred and was able to subvert party and government to the situation in the American party, its own history, its policies, its own analysis, its own structure, its weaknesses, and contributions. Some of us expressed the belief that the Leninist principles of organization, adopted as a result of underground conditions in Russia for a semifeudal country with a repressive monarchy, were certainly no model for a socialist movement in a bourgeois, democratic, advanced capitalist society. Lenin's concept of party structure was written into the conditions for affiliation with the Communist International. They called for a vanguard party, a monolithic organization, propagation of a common political line, a tightly controlled, centralized body of leadership making decisions which were binding on the membership (known as democratic centralism), complete party control of its press, defense of the Soviet Union from imperialist attack, the overthrow of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In practice, Stalin was able to use the very structure of party organizational principles to become the dictator of the party and to make of the government a party state under his control.

Our discussions in the American Communist party raised questions about the structure of our own organization and the nature of our own country. We began to raise questions about the one-party system under socialism and consider the need for a different path to socialism in a pluralistic society. We considered the right to dissent from official policies, and the need for a new type of Socialist movement based on American traditions, culture, political, and economic realities in the discussion.

MW: Can you remember the names of people prominent in the party who shared your general views at that time?

Sennett: General views, yes; we had many general views and we also had some specific differences of opinion. There was nothing really clearly worked out. I would say people like Johnny Gates, Steve Nelson, George Charney, Oleta Yates, Fred Fine, Sid Stein, at one time Claude Lightfoot, who was the chairman of the Illinois Communist party, who later again changed his thinking. However, most of the people who were in favor of basic change--and they were in the majority--were to be reduced to a minority as people walked out and left the party.

MW: I don't remember the time sequence exactly, but didn't Howard Fast play a role in the debate during that period, either while he was associated with the party or after he left?

Sennett: He didn't play a role in the debate within the Communist party because he was not an open, active member of the party. He was a member of the party, a supporter of the party's policies, and he obviously was disenchanted as a result of the Khrushchev revelations, and he wrote a book about it. But he played no role, as far as I know, of any kind within the Communist party in fighting for his viewpoint.

MW: His views were not important in shaping the debate?

Sennett: I don't think so. They were a popular expression. He wrote a book that was something like The God that Failed.

MW: Isn't that the name of the Arthur Koestler book?

Sennett: I don't think so, but that was the essence of the kind of book he wrote. Howard Fast was a popular writer but I don't think his book of "confession" was widely circulated.

Joseph Broz Tito was the head of the government in Yugoslavia and he, with his party, was read out of the Communist bloc in 1948. The League of Communists of Yugoslavia was a part of the Communist Information Bureau, an association of Communist bloc countries formed at the end of World War II.

In 1956, Khrushchev apologized to Tito and welcomed Yugoslavia back into the family of Socialist nations. But Tito was still critical of the Soviet Union and stated that the Soviet system spawned the cult of the individual. He contended that the nondemocratic structure in the Soviet Union was at the root of the problem and he predicted that there would also be great difficulties with eastern bloc, Communist-led countries since the Soviet Union had no confidence in the independent Socialist forces in those countries and they feared the restoration of capitalism there.

This was borne out by the mass strikes and changes in party leadership in Poland and the revolution of the Hungarian people. The revolt in Hungary against the Communist-led government of Matyas Rakosi was crushed as a result of the intervention by Soviet armed forces.

MW: That is M-a-t-y--

Sennett: M-a-t-y-a-s R-a-k-o-s-i.

DISCUSSIONS OUTSIDE THE PARTY

Sennett: I began to reach out to discuss a number of these matters with people outside the party. I felt that there were a number of independent thinking people whom we had ignored in the past and that these were left-oriented people, and that they could help in the whole rethinking process even though they were members of other existing small Socialist groups.

In the process, I met and corresponded with Reverend A. J. Muste,* a long-time pacifist and independent socialist activist and with Sidney Lens, a Chicago trade union organizer and writer who had broken with the Trotskyists and had been part of another left sect known as Schachtmanites.

MW: That was--

Sennett: Named after Max Schachtman who had been a leader in the Trotskyist movement. I also met and exchanged views with Harvey O'Connor, a well-known author who lived in Chicago and had long been an independent socialist, with Burt Cochran, Harry Braverman, and Frank Fried, who had split away from the Trotskyists and were publishing a new magazine called the American Socialist. I worked with Fried, O'Connor, and Lens in Chicago to organize an independent socialist forum in the city and we were able to establish a dialogue with people other than those who were in the Communist party.

A letter I wrote to Reverend Muste in November of 1956 dealt with a proposal by him to organize a socialist educational society. In my letter I stated that "naturally this new organization would more closely parallel views expressed by you than that of those

* See appendix A.

held by Foster and Eugene Dennis in the Communist party. Your proposal for a socialist educational society more closely approximates the need for the present period. It would appear to me that the aims of any new socialist organization in the present stage should be limited to agreement on the need for the study of socialism, of American conditions, the propagation of socialist ideas through forums, tracts, literature, and the issuance perhaps of a regular monthly or weekly publication."

I also added the following: "I am somewhat concerned, however, as you must be, that any new movement be aborted through either failure to involve the most influential and varied leaders on the left, premature organizational decisions, or by the involvement of left sects who have decided that they already have all of the answers and it only remains for them to show the way to all of the others."

MW: A. J. Muste was a man whose political views derived from his religious position and who was a Ghandian, believed in Ghandian techniques of nonviolence. Were you aware of all of that?

Sennett: Oh, yes. I learned that from Muste.

MW: Wasn't this a really big leap for you, to get in touch with a Ghandian and a religious person and say, "I think your ideas are better than the ideas of the left"?

Sennett: No, I think that many of the precepts and ideas growing out of religion, like the brotherhood of man, are close to socialist thinking. Muste himself was an example of a Christian preacher who found religious views to be compatible with socialist humanism.

MW: But this really boils down to your abandonment of the whole concept of revolution then, doesn't it?

Sennett: I wasn't concerned about abandoning past anything. I was interested in opening new avenues in my thinking. I wanted to broaden my understanding of American conditions and work with others who recognized the need for a new socialist orientation.

MW: But where did you think it would lead?

Sennett: I was in favor of a limited study program and it was natural to get together with other left-minded people who were open to new thinking.

MW: But your notion, or at least the Marxist-Leninist notion of social and political change is that it comes about through violent upheaval and that the ruling class will not give up its oppressive

position without a violent struggle. A. J. Muste, of course, took an entirely different kind of notion--a reconciliation of the classes--and so basically by forming an alliance with him, either you had fundamentally changed your notion about how great social change would come about or you were on a tactical basis willing to set that aside for a moment.

Sennett: No, this had nothing to do with tactics. Obviously, everything was up for grabs and my ideas were, too. I felt that I was not going to broaden the scope of my understanding about the United States and American conditions by simply dealing with members of the Communist party. I felt that I had to begin to listen to ideas expressed by other people in addition to trying to espouse some myself. I was in no position, in view of the challenge to my basic beliefs that were involved at that period of time, to sit on any rigid principles that I may have had in the past.

MW: I raise this question because I looked at the struggles of the Indian Communist party, and Mahatma Gandhi caused them no end of trouble because Gandhi, on the one hand, was able to build a successful mass movement, but on the other hand he rejected the fundamental philosophical beliefs of Marxism and Leninism. The Communists were in this terrible dilemma. If they rejected him, they were rejecting the most powerful mass movement in India, which obviously they wanted to be in step with, but if they accepted him, they were accepting someone who was in fundamental contradiction to everything they believed. Now, it seems to me that on a smaller scale you have got the same thing here between you and A. J. Muste in that A. J. Muste just stands for a philosophical and tactical and strategic position which is 180 degrees opposite Marxism and Leninism. There is no way to look at it except that that's the way it is, to move from the position you previously occupied to an alliance with him, it seems to me, represents either a fundamental break in your philosophical views or a tactical decision.

Sennett: I would say that it was the beginning of a fundamental break with some of my philosophical views and I was prepared to consider the role that Mahatma Gandhi played in India as having a bearing on my thinking in terms of perhaps what the strategy, tactics, and philosophy should be for humankind. I no longer could accept the line laid down by the Communist precursors of the current Communist party without question.

SIXTEENTH CONVENTION OF THE AMERICAN COMMUNIST PARTY

Sennett: The Communist party was involved in a period of all-consuming discussion from June, 1956, when the Khrushchev report was made public in the United States, to its sixteenth convention in New York City in February of 1957. Several months prior to that convention, the party's national committee issued the draft of its major resolution that was to be put before the convention. [The draft drew] conclusions from agreed-upon mistakes made, outlined what was to be an independent policy, and interpreted Marxism and Leninism to the perceived realities of the United States. This draft resolution was widely debated in all party clubs, section committees, and district boards.

In addition, the national committee issued a biweekly discussion bulletin in which individuals and organizational bodies contributed their thinking, criticized sections of the resolution, or made alternate proposals. The Daily Worker continued to use its pages as an ongoing forum for this debate and discussion. Each party district organized its local convention in two segments, one segment prior to the national convention and the other was reconvened after the national gathering.

Delegates to the national convention were elected at the local conclaves. Since we had decided to have the main differing points of view represented, our Illinois district elected a group of delegates who were the so-called left, or Foster supporters.

MW: Left of Foster or--

Sennett: No, the so-called left which constituted the group supporting William Z. Foster.

MW: Oh, left or Foster supporters.

Sennett: The so-called right wing, consisting of John Gates and other strong reform so-called reexaminationist views, and then in addition what initially became the center or "unity group" led by Gene Dennis. In the main, the other districts also elected delegates from these three trends as well.

MW: Now, where did you put yourself in that?

Sennett: I was in the reform or reexaminationist view grouping but we did not have an organized group or faction. This, despite the charge by William Z. Foster that there was an organized faction led by John Gates.

MW: Why didn't you form an organization or a caucus?

- Sennett: I think it was because many of us didn't even agree amongst ourselves. There was no united alternative policy and there were many divergent views as to the future of the party organization.
- MW: It wasn't because of persistence of the old Leninist view that you don't form factions?
- Sennett: Not at all. I don't think very much would have been gained by organizing a faction. Many of us were burned out and had no heart for an internal struggle with Foster and the so-called "unity group" seeking compromises to keep the party together regardless of differences. There was a vigorous debate before, during, and for some time after the national convention and the district conventions. There were no holds barred, but the basic decisions and the future direction of the party were affected by the defection of thousands of its members from 1956 through 1958.
- MW: Did a lot of your friends start leaving the party?
- Sennett: Yes, they did.
- MW: Did you have any discussions with them about it?
- Sennett: I did not try to dissuade anybody from leaving after the Illinois convention. That was the convention that reconvened after the national convention. I did not try to persuade anybody to leave or stay. I tried to persuade people to stay before the national convention, but when our district convention reconvened, a number who were delegates did not return.

IMPACT ON FRIENDSHIPS AND FAMILY LIFE

- MW: Did you have a lot of discussions about all of this with your wife during this period?
- Sennett: My wife, Gussie, was a participant in her branch but was not immersed in the discussion to the extent that I was. After all, as a functionary I was involved day and night.
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- MW: We were talking about the impact of the controversies following the Khrushchev speech to the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist party on the party, and particularly we were just mentioning the discussion that went on in your family with Gussie.

Sennett: We were involved in many discussions and, in the main, she agreed with the position that I took.

MW: She was in a different party club?

Sennett: Yes. But I also met with other sections and clubs as part of my responsibility.

MW: And you didn't have any disagreement about any of this?

Sennett: No, we did not.

MW: Did she go through the same kind of trauma that you went through as a result of this speech?

Sennett: I don't think that she felt it quite the way that I did. It didn't seem to be as traumatic for her. She was horrified at what she read, but she did not show her great shock as much as I did, and she was not involved in the convention preparations and was unable to spend as much time as I did with the party organizations.

MW: Was she becoming less political during this period?

Sennett: No, she wasn't becoming less political. She had the main burden of work, the children, and the house. When I was a CP organizer, during all the time we were married, she was the main breadwinner in the family. She sacrificed a lot of her time, including political and personal time, to make it possible for me to be a "professional revolutionist."

MW: Were you aware that this controversy had a damaging effect on personal relationships either in the marriages of other party members or in the long-time standing friendships? Did this split a lot of people away from their friends and their husbands and wives?

Sennett: On the whole, it seems to me that most party functionaries who were married stayed together longer than nonparty couples I knew. This may have had something to do with their common political dedication. But there were serious strains among some. I think that less party members went to psychiatrists and psychologists in those days than among other sections of the population.

MW: This discussion took place in a climate when McCarthyism in this country was on the wane, isn't that correct? That is, McCarthy sort of peaked in 1954 with the army-McCarthy hearings.

Sennett: That's true.

- MW: And while there was still the House Un-American Activities Committee and various governmental agencies involved in surveillance and repression of leftists in this country, there was a freer atmosphere in which this debate could take place, wouldn't you say?
- Sennett: There was a relatively freer atmosphere. After all, the Communist party had come out of illegality. It really wasn't declared illegal officially but persecution, witch hunts, arrests, and convictions under the Smith Act caused the Communist party to develop an underground apparatus. This structure was liquidated by 1956 and the party was regrouping in a more open manner. There was no lack of surveillance by the FBI. The party convention in 1957 was swarming with FBI agents outside the hall and certainly with agents and informers on the inside.
- MW: Would the debate, in your opinion, have been different had McCarthyism continued with the full strength that it had prior to 1954? Would the party have reacted differently to the Stalinist or to the Khrushchev disclosures if there had not been a freer public atmosphere for discussion?
- Sennett: Probably. There would, of course, have been more of a tendency of people to stick with the party in the face of greater persecution. And the discussions could not have been so open and freewheeling.
- MW: In retrospect, would you say that the Khrushchev speech was the most damaging thing that ever happened to the American Communist party?
- Sennett: I would say it was the most damaging for the party as then constituted. But, in the long run, it was the most enlightening and probably the most useful for the cause of democratic socialism in America.
- MW: For American socialism?
- Sennett: Not for the Communist party, but for American socialism.
- MW: But it pretty much marked the beginning of a long decline of the American Communist party?
- Sennett: It certainly did, but as I came to recognize at a later date, it was a necessary stage that we had to go through in the United States if we were ever going to build a democratic socialist movement.
- MW: Which in effect meant that one had to abandon the Communist party and take a different approach than the old Marxist-Leninist approach?

Sennett: Probably, unless the Communist party had been ready and willing to make a drastic political transformation. Given the party's allegiance to Soviet policies, the elements were not present to transform the American Communist movement.

MW: It's one of the great ironies of history that Khrushchev did more damage to the Marxist-Leninist party in this country than the FBI and McCarthy and everybody else put together it seems.

Sennett: However true that is, some day Khrushchev may well be praised by those Socialists who survive or by a new generation who build a new indigenous democratic movement.

MW: In other words, he served socialism while damaging the whole party.

Sennett: Sometimes you've got to destroy the old before you can build the new.

MW: So let's see, where are we now. We have a few other points here.

Sennett: The three tendencies leading up to the Communist party convention and for about a year after that gathering were in constant flux. The reform group which initially had the majority was losing most of its support because its supporters were walking out of the party. The center discovered that unity with Foster was leading to a return to the old party methodology and policies. Many people in the center also gave up, resigning from the party. By 1958, Foster and Dennis had "united" the party at the expense of the bulk of its previous membership.

MW: This was nationwide as well as in Illinois? I mean you are talking about nationwide--

Sennett: Oh, yes, nationwide including Illinois.

MW: Okay, I think we've set the scene for your eventual departure from the party and that is the subject of the next interview, right?

Sennett: That is correct.

XII Leaving the Communist Party

[Interview 13: August 18, 1982]##

MW: In this session, we are approaching the period when you decided to leave the Communist party. What were the key events that influenced your decision?

Sennett: Largely it was the result of the discussions and decisions of the national convention, and the two district conventions held in Illinois.

DISAFFECTION AT THE NATIONAL AND DISTRICT PARTY CONVENTIONS

Sennett: I was beginning to come to some conclusion about where the party was heading. For example, when the Illinois district convention reconvened after the national convention, a number of those who had attended the state's earlier national preconvention gathering had already left the party. Many of the delegates to the district convention didn't come back for the reconvened session of that convention. These were mainly people who, like myself, were in the strongly pro-reform, great-changes-are-necessary group. Those who came to the state convention were, in the main, Foster hard-line supporters and Dennis centrists--those who were trying to achieve unity with all sides. A minority who attended were people like myself, who wanted basic changes, and some others who weren't sure where they stood but wanted to know what the national convention had decided.

MW: And you were not well organized, as you said. That is, you hadn't organized into a faction with a campaign to turn the party around. You were simply a group of people who had individual notions about reform; you didn't have a strategy for taking over the convention.

Sennett: No, we did not. People who were in the reform group were not of that mind. A number of us would get together from time to time informally, just to discuss our thinking and to exchange ideas, but it was not in any way an organized group. We didn't have a strategy and didn't make any decisions as to what to do as a body.

MW: Was that a mistake? Do you think you might have turned things around if you had organized it?

Sennett: I don't think so. Looking back, there had to be a kind of weaning out process. I didn't know whether I was anxious to preserve the party by winning control. I didn't know where it could go, what it could do, and whether it would be wise. I was working with some people outside the party and we were talking about the need for a different kind of association, but we weren't talking about structure--setting up a new organization to replace the party. I favored a period of study without the need for a political program or organizing activities.

MW: At this stage, could you say that you had already sort of psychologically had it with the party and you were pretty much fed up?

Sennett: I think that was the case. I was encouraged by some of the thinking at the national convention about the need for change and by the large number who were interested in bringing it about. I thought that we might be able to get significant support in Illinois to move in that direction. But when the Illinois convention reconvened, a number of people who had attended the national pre-convention session already had opted out. They didn't return to participate because they had decided to leave the party. I didn't feel that we had much to work with and that the process of decimation would continue.

MW: When people make momentous changes like this, that is, leaving organizations that they have been with for many years-- You had been twenty-seven years or so with the YCL and party, and it had really determined your way or life. Leaving the party would mean a fundamental change in the way you viewed the world and everything, it would seem to me. In making changes of this magnitude, a variety of factors probably enter into people's decision-making processes. Some of them are intellectual, some of them are emotional, some of them simply have to do with weariness and boredom, some of them have to do with personal relationships, and so forth. Which of these factors do you think were operating most strongly during this period of your disenchantment with the party?

Sennett: It was a whole number of things. I was obviously very disturbed about what this meant for the future, but I wasn't thinking in terms of what I had to do about my future except for the fact that I was going to take a job in the workaday world.

MW: You decided that first?

Sennett: I had decided that even before the national convention. I decided that I would, at the right time, leave full-time [party] work for good. I had taken jobs in factories and offices before, but only done this temporarily until I took on a new party assignment. This time, I decided that I would go into the commercial world and carve out either a profession or a career for myself. I wasn't sure exactly what. But I intended to take on any paying job as a start.

MW: What made you decide to do that?

Sennett: I wanted to get away from the interminable discussions and arguments and what I considered would turn into factional back-biting in the party. I felt I needed some space. The only way to do that was to avoid participation and activity of any kind [in the party]. I thought this would be a good time to concentrate on making a decent living.

MW: It wasn't that you were just sort of fed up with the kind of impoverished existence that a full-time party worker has to live with, that is, very few of the amenities in life that make American life comfortable, and you just sort of got tired of that and wanted to have a few more advantages?

Sennett: No, I wasn't thinking in terms of making a lot of money. I was thinking of actually being a worker because I had decided to go into the printing trades and I thought that if I learned the trade, I could become a skilled worker (a "stripper," preparing the photographic material in offset work for plate making) and could make a living and become active in the union.

MW: Okay, before we leave the Illinois convention, is there anything else you think is important to say about that?

Sennett: I was disappointed in the compromises that were made at the sixteenth convention. I felt that the people who remained in the party were, in the main, ready to accept them. And, in the long run, thousands of other disillusioned people would quit with the rest of the organization weakened but united in a hopeless sect.

MW: Did anybody during this period go around to those people who were dropping out, who were people who had views similar to your own, and say, "Look, why don't you guys stay in a little while longer

and if we all get together, we can turn things around?" Was anybody doing anything like that?

Sennett: Yes, some of us tried. I tried to do that and others continued even after I gave up. But weariness and hopelessness had set in and the trend of most was to change one's own direction by getting out.

MW: Did you play a very salient role in the party convention; that is, were you a floor leader or were you written about in the press?

Sennett: Yes, I did, particularly in the two phases of the state's district convention. I was a member of the district board strongly in favor of drastic change.

FACTIONAL DISPUTES AND "BURNOUT" AMONG PARTY MEMBERS

Sennett: I was part of the unorganized major grouping characterized by Foster as being "revisionists," those who were trying to undermine the teachings of Lenin and Marx and had taken stands which were considered anti-Soviet.

MW: Revisionism is generally considered a right-wing phenomenon, right?

Sennett: Yes.

MW: The left-wing phenomenon was called left sectarianism.

Sennett: That is correct.

MW: Was there any left sectarianism at the convention?

Sennett: Oh, definitely. They were people who agreed with William Z. Foster in the main. The Dennis group fought for unity and representation of all groups in all leading bodies at the convention.

MW: But they weren't the left sectarians?

Sennett: No, they were not.

MW: So who were the left sectarians?

Sennett: The left sectarians, I considered, were people who were becoming Maoists, although there was not yet an open break with China and identification of that trend. They were even more rigid in the

defense of Soviet policies and their interpretation of Marxist doctrines than Foster. But they rallied around him at the convention.

MW: Would you say that during that period the term left sectarian and Stalinist were sort of interchangeable?

Sennett: I think so. They were also the people who strongly defended Stalin, who felt that he was being besmirched. But there were differences among the left sectarians. It wasn't a cohesive working group.

MW: It was a pretty chaotic period, I gather.

Sennett: Very much so. In fact, had there been factions around clearly defined points of view, there could have been about a dozen instead of the three groups commonly mentioned.

MW: Okay, that sort of wraps up the Illinois convention and I think we covered your general attitudes.

Sennett: I'd like to add that while I was not part of a faction or an organized opposition group, that initially my position or the position that I supported was that of the majority of the party members. Since those party members were walking out, the party "purists" were certain to come out on top.

MW: Now, wait a minute. You are saying that the majority of the people in the party felt the way you did. Being the majority, presumably they would have been able to impose their views on the party, but instead they simply left. That doesn't seem to make much sense.

Sennett: Well, it was a vacillating majority. It was a splintered majority, no longer concerned about saving the party. They believed that basic change was necessary, but many of them were not ready to participate in order to bring it about. They didn't care about taking control of the existing organization. They felt that perhaps something new was necessary, but they were not willing to work for it. The dominant mood was criticism of the party, not preserving it.

That was not uppermost in their minds. That was not the case with the left sectarians and the centrist group. They said, "The party must be preserved at all costs."

MW: But why didn't the majority say, "Let's preserve the party but let's make it into a new party"? Change its name--

Sennett: No, they didn't think that was enough. Some felt that there ought to be a new element brought into the picture, and that included people outside of the party's ranks. They were not prepared psychologically to take the organizational steps necessary even to carry out the thinking that they had projected in their own minds and in their discussions. They were fed up with organization at that moment.

MW: Were you sure at that time that this was a majority attitude?

Sennett: I thought so.

MW: You didn't count votes or anything.

Sennett: No, but I talked to many who walked out and others who were on the sidelines within the party. The only votes one could count were those participating at sections, districts, and the national convention. And the people attending were those still committed to staying. Most people voted with their feet.

MW: This seems to me extraordinarily paradoxical because here are people who have been members of an organization, which is dedicated to revolution, which is psychologically revolutionary, which believes intensively in the necessity of organization and group activity, which is dedicated to the socialist ideal and so forth. They are a majority. Therefore, they can control the party and instead they just melt away. After all of these years of commitment to struggle, they don't want to struggle any more.

Sennett: You must remember that even though the party called itself a vanguard organization that there was really a vanguard of the vanguard. Most party members were not activists. Probably not more than 20 percent of the membership participated in actual organizational work within the party. From my own experience in Illinois, I would guess that probably one-quarter of the activists left the organization by the end of 1957. More than one-half were gone by mid-year 1958. The nonparticipants probably left in greater numbers. Estimates made about total membership (usually overstated) were about 20,000 in 1955 and 10,000 in 1958.

Many people were "burned out" singly and in groups. This was an important factor in making it impossible to win greater support for further organizational efforts.

MW: Should I infer from what you said that the Communist party in reality was never really terribly different from most other political organizations in that it was composed of a relatively small elite who ran the operation and a fairly large group of followers who didn't pay an awful lot of attention to detail and did, in essence, what the leadership suggested they do.

Sennett: No, the party had a much higher percentage of activists than in most other organizations. There were more people who were participants in the party structure and as Communists working in unions and other organizations and movements. Communists were more dedicated and more involved in carrying out the program and activity of the party and of other organizations to which they belonged than any group of people I have ever seen.

MW: That's interesting.

Sennett: One of the conclusions that I was coming to in connection with the need for a democratic socialist movement based on revolutionary traditions of our own nation was that we would have to make structural changes that the party convention had not agreed to and they had to do with the nature of what was called a Leninist party modeled after the Soviet Union--the whole matter of a monolithic organization, restrictions on the right to dissent, the so-called vanguard role of the party and the top-down decision making and control which was exercised under the name of democratic centralism. I felt that all of this had to be discarded and that we did not have the support in the party organization anywhere to make that all happen.

MW: You simply had had it with the whole fundamental conceptual notion of the Communist party, so then it was clear that you were psychologically no longer a Communist at that point.

Sennett: I was no longer a Communist with a capital C; I considered myself a Communist with a small c.

MW: What is the difference?

Sennett: The difference is that you can believe in the aims, purposes, and philosophy of communism as a body of policy, but you don't believe in the precepts and functioning of the organization, the Communist party as such.

MW: We could put it another way. What you had abandoned really was Leninism, but you had hung on to Marxism.

Sennett: I don't consider that Leninism was purely organizational tenets. I think that Lenin had some important contributions to make to Marxism, too, so that in that sense I agreed that Leninism had some validity, but I did not agree basically with the Leninist party structure any longer.

MW: Which many scholars would argue was his main contribution to the whole Communist movement, namely his organizational theories.

Sennett: When Eugene Dennis, the party's general secretary, called on the party to "return to work" shortly after the convention, I viewed this as the end of reexamination and change. To work in what manner? To work for what goals outside of the overall goal of socialism? I sensed this as a pulling back from the "new look" by Communists that Dennis had originally called for. He was now making accommodations with Foster, the national chairman. Dennis was now calling for a struggle against revisionism as well as left sectarianism when the latter struggle had hardly begun.

PROMINENT PARTY MEMBERS

MW: You knew Dennis personally, didn't you?

Sennett: Yes, I did.

MW: Did you like him?

Sennett: He was a kind of shy person for being a public figure, but I liked him as a human being. I didn't know him as a close friend.

MW: You wouldn't want to give a little more detail about that, in light of the fact that he is an historical figure and you knew him personally.

Sennett: No, I really didn't know him too closely. I knew him only from party meetings I attended where he was present. I don't recall socializing with him and I wasn't that close to know too much about his personality except as it appeared to me.

MW: Of the famous top leaders, which ones did you know best?

Sennett: I did get to know a number of the leaders of the national committee and the board. Gil Green was and still is a close friend. He is still a member of the Communist party and, despite our political differences, we remain friends.

MW: Given how small the party was and the important role you played in Illinois, that strikes me as a little unusual that you didn't know more of the top leaders better, that they didn't stay with you when they came to Chicago and that sort of thing.

Sennett: I knew various editors of the Daily Worker.

MW: John Gates?

Sennett: I knew John Gates, Max Gordon, and Alan Max, among others.

MW: Starobin?

Sennett: Yes, Joe Starobin. Fred Fine, the former party national organizational secretary, is also a very close friend. Gil Green was my step-brother for a time when his mother was married to my father. I worked closely with Claude Lightfoot, who is still one of the national leaders of the Communist party. He was the Illinois District organizer when I was the political director and at one time also the organizational secretary in Illinois.

MW: He subsequently attacked you when you left the party, didn't he?

Sennett: Yes, he did; attacking a friend or a person after a person leaves the party was unfortunately too common a practice. If you did not adhere to the party program or if you left the party because of differences, you were no longer considered a friend. I haven't seen Claude Lightfoot, even though we had been political associates and friends, since the time when I left for California in 1957. However, some party leaders have mellowed over the years and I am friendly with several others.

MW: Most were not capable of separating political disagreements from personal relationships?

Sennett: No, they were not. Among friends in Chicago, Gussie and I had a very close relationship with Jesse Prosten [spells name] and his wife, Ann. Their kids and ours played together very often. Jesse was no hard-bitten dogmatic Communist. He was a soft-spoken effective leader of the United Packinghouse Workers Union. He eventually became the president of that union. I was very surprised when he and Ann ended that friendship after we moved to California and I quit the Communist party. I learned from other friends that they considered me "anti-party" because I had made my disagreements and leaving the party a public matter. There were others who told me of their disappointment in my leaving who, at a later time, left the party themselves.

MW: And then got into communication with you later?

Sennett: Some did and some did not. Most who left the party left political life, and some were more concerned with building new lives for themselves away from other former party people in their past.

MW: A couple of minutes ago, I asked you to comment on the top leaders that you knew. Future historians looking into the Communist party will probably look around at oral histories like yours to try to find out something more about the top leadership as human beings than one can find by reading their own memoirs and speeches, party literature, and so forth. I get the impression that you don't

have much to add or don't want to add anything about these people that would shed more light on the kinds of people they were.

Sennett: I would say that knowing Gil Green as closely as I did, I could best comment upon him. I always considered that Gil was the most compassionate person who related to people that I knew in the party leadership. He had a great deal of respect among the party membership as a whole. He had been the district organizer of Illinois. He was also, at one time, the district organizer of the party in New York. He was a member of the national board which constituted the twelve leading members of the Communist party. In his youth, he was the general secretary of the Young Communist League and he became a member of the Young Communist International and also of the executive committee of the Communist International. He attended meetings of the Communist International and the Young Communist International when those organizations were in existence and participated in discussions with some of the outstanding Communists in the world. Yet he was a very down-to-earth, humble guy. There was no ego that was so overwhelming in Gil Green that one might have noted in some other Communist leaders.

He was very down-to-earth, very flexible, and very effective in working to get the party to become a mass organization. He worked to develop a national youth movement which--

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MW: Would you say that these qualities of warmth and humanity that you admired in Gil Green were not very common among top leadership in the Communist party?

Sennett: Of the people I knew and met, Gil and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn were outstanding in that respect. Earl Browder, the general secretary of the party from 1930 to 1945, was the most creative but certainly exuded very little warmth. Generally, in the ranks of the party, I found more caring and compassionate people than I did in many other walks of life--particularly in the world of business.

There were a number who did not practice the party's professed concern for the practice of humanism but that goal and that vision was relevant to what our organization was all about.

LEAVING THE COMMUNIST PARTY STAFF

MW: I think we've covered the convention and the political side of it and the ideological issues involved. Did you leave the party

before you went looking for a new job or did you go looking for a new job first?

Sennett: No, I went looking for a new job first. I thought that the party needed a respite from leading struggles. That was a common phrase, "the party must lead struggles." I thought that it needed to pull itself together without leading struggles, that it ought to reassess its policies, that it ought to take time out to study, to reconsider its theory, strategy, methodology, structure, and relationships to other movements. I thought that a lot of time was needed to think things through before basic changes could be made. To do that required abstention from activities called for in the past. It was obvious that most members were burned out. But this was not true of the die-hards in the old-line leadership. I thought, therefore, of leaving the party, but I wasn't quite certain. I couldn't see myself walking away from my basic beliefs. I needed more time to think it through. I felt that the best thing was to get a job away from party activity. Gussie and I talked about our future. We talked about my going to work, her job, where we lived, what we might do. I talked about the problems that I felt that we would have and, particularly, if I decided to leave the party.

I felt that rather than stay in Illinois where I would continually meet up with my old friends that we ought to try to make a life elsewhere. I had always looked very favorably upon a move to California and we quite readily agreed that that was the step that we wanted to take.

MW: Why California? Because you liked it when you had been out here previously as a boy?

Sennett: We also had visited California on vacation in 1955 and decided it would be a nice place to go. But when I got out of the service, I had been thinking about California and I asked the party for permission to move. Since I was a functionary, I was not a free agent to make my own decision. The party in Illinois decided that I should not move, and I conformed to that decision. However I never gave up my feelings for moving to California. Gussie and I were now free agents and we could now make that decision. But the first step was to get a job while still in Chicago and Gussie was working there. She could continue on her job while I went to California without the family and looked for a job there.

To sum up; I had no heart for an internal party struggle. I was convinced that Foster and Dennis would strive to maintain the American Communist party as a monolithic organization and safeguard the Soviet-approved "franchise." This was clear from their stand in justifying Soviet actions in Hungary in 1956 after their

refusal to recognize it as a genuine revolt against Stalinism as practiced in that country.

MW: Now, do you mean that you decided because of the 1956 events to leave the party or simply leave the staff?

Sennett: No, I decided to leave the staff. I wasn't ready to make a decision to leave the party. I felt that in moving to California, I would also transfer into the party as a nonparticipating member while I would assess the situation again.

MW: By leaving the staff then you didn't have to get permission to go to California?

Sennett: No, as a party functionary I still had to get permission and I asked the party for a transfer. Claude Lightfoot, the district organizer, wrote a letter for me in the form of a transfer to the party organization in California. It was addressed to Mickey Lima, the northern California district organizer.

NW: So in effect you were given permission to move.

Sennett: Yes, I was.

MW: So how about getting a job in California? How did that go?

Sennett: It wasn't easy for me to get a job in the first place. Since I thought about getting into the printing trades, a friend who was in the party and was a printer, Bernie Persily [spells name], made some contact for me with an offset print shop in Chicago and I went to work as an apprentice at age forty-two. I remember getting \$1.75 an hour as a starting wage. The owner of the shop said that he was embarrassed to hire me at my age as an apprentice and at a low wage. I told him I wanted to learn the trade and was glad to get the opportunity.

MW: You were interested in printing; it wasn't just that that happened to be the first job that came along, but you were really seeking perhaps a career in printing?

Sennett: I was. When I was a youngster, I had been an apprentice in a letter press shop for a short time. Later I worked with the Chicago Star and learned a lot more about printing and printing processes. I felt that the trade was a natural for me to step into. I worked at the job for about four months before deciding to make my next move.

MW: That was in Chicago?

Sennett: In Chicago. It was in April of 1957, and Gussie and I agreed that I would leave for California to find a job there. I contacted my sister Betty, who lived in San Francisco, and she invited me to come out and stay at her place. She was separated at the time and had two children and was living in suburban Colma.

MW: Gussie was working at this time.

Sennett: She was working, which enabled me to leave.

MW: So that was the main family income then.

Sennett: That's right. In fact, when I was a functionary, her income always had been the major regular income of the family.

MW: Because of the low pay--

Sennett: Yes. I think my salary in the Communist party when I left was about twenty-five dollars a week and, of course, with Gussie's work and income, we were able to live moderately well.

MW: You don't remember what her salary was?

Sennett: No, I don't. I believe she was making about fifty to fifty-five dollars a week then.

MW: This was--

Sennett: It was 1957, yes.

MW: You couldn't live very well on eighty-five a week, right?

Sennett: We managed. I took on some odd jobs at times. My brother had a billiard and bowling supply house, and years before that, I had worked with him and learned how to set up pool tables and drill and plug bowling balls. In later years I helped him set up a discount electrical appliance business, by providing unions and other groups with discount cards at his store.

MW: You had two children.

Sennett: Yes.

MW: It was still pretty rough, wasn't it? Did you have the usual amenities like a refrigerator and television?

Sennett: Oh, yes, we had a refrigerator. And a friend gave us a television set in 1949.

MW: Did you have a Thor washing machine?

Sennett: We had a Thor washing machine, absolutely, and some other amenities that go with lower middle-class living. There were times when the party was unable to make the payroll and I would take on some work elsewhere for a time.

MW: Did you have a car?

Sennett: Yes, we managed to have a car. The party provided a car for my use in 1951.

MOVING TO CALIFORNIA

MW: What happened when you moved out to California?

Sennett: I moved in with my sister and her children and planned to try for work in offset printing. Through a friend who was a printer, I learned about the need for strippers and plate makers. He suggested it would be easier for me to find a job through the union than to try the shops one at a time. I contacted the Lithographers Union and they sent me to several places where they needed journeymen. I was hardly that but with a shortage of skilled people available I was able to exaggerate the experience I had and get a job in an Oakland shop called Fontes Printing. I was able to start at \$2.75 an hour with a promise that I would be raised to journeyman's pay within three months if I could do the work. So my first job in California was a dollar an hour higher than my pay in Chicago.

MW: Of course, living expenses were higher in California though, weren't they?

Sennett: Somewhat, but that was still an increase in real wages over what I had been earning. And the union had indicated that I would become a full-fledged journeyman after my trial period with a union card certified to that effect. Thus, despite my concern about FBI surveillance and intervention because of my party background, I managed to get a job that I was able to hold onto.

MW: You said that despite FBI intervention you got a job. What was the FBI intervention?

Sennett: The FBI was not only trying to talk to me but to pressure others to get me to talk to them. I refused. Realizing my changing position in the party, they felt that I was a candidate to become an informant. That was a policy they pursued very vigorously with all possible party members.

MW: That is, approaching people who exhibited signs of disenchantment?

Sennett: Yes, but in addition to that, they would visit neighbors and try to recruit people to give them information about your whereabouts and goings and comings and follow up on people who would visit, bug telephone conversations, and so forth.

MW: Do you mean they would go to your neighbors and say, "The man next door is a Communist and we are trying to find out more about him?"

Sennett: That's right, they would do that, and they would also call and visit your employer. I learned that they didn't go to the employer and say, "Did you know so-and-so is a Communist, we suggest you get rid of him." They did state that so-and-so was a Communist. And they would ask employers to report anything suspicious about that employee. With a visit from the FBI, in the days of McCarthyism most employers would try to get rid of those reported to be subversives. That was a common practice by the FBI, and many people lost their jobs as a result of that kind of intervention. They did this everywhere I went. They did it with the printer who employed me in Chicago. I learned that from the printer himself. He was not frightened and did not fire me. They would do this any place that I would take a job. I expected that to happen and I had to take that into account.

While still living at my sister's house and with my family still in Chicago I was having second thoughts about working in the printing trades.

MW: Let me interrupt for a moment. Your sister, Betty, was not a Communist?

Sennett: No, Betty was not a Communist, but she was friendly to the ideas of communism and socialism.

MW: And she knew all about you?

Sennett: Oh, absolutely. In her youth, she had been a member of the left-wing youth section of the International Workers Order. But that's as far as it went.

ENTERING THE BUSINESS WORLD

Sennett: Bob Land, my brother-in-law, who was separated from Betty at that time, was one of the owners with his brother of a sporting goods store called Land Brothers in downtown San Francisco.

MW: That's Land Brothers?

Sennett: Yes. He asked me to work in the store part-time while I was still with Fontes Printing. There had been a large fire in the store and they were having a fire sale with a tremendous response from the buying public. I went to work in the store as a clerk after my regular working hours, working in the store evenings and weekends.

Land Brothers became a booming operation after the fire sale and they opened several other stores in the peninsula. [I discussed with Bob] my work in printing and I indicated that I didn't think that that was what I wanted to pursue. Bob suggested that I go to work for him full time, starting as a sales clerk and developing other sales lines as I learned the business. In view of my previous experience, I opened up the department which sold bowling equipment and billiard tables. Eventually I became a buyer for the store and assistant manager to Bob and his brother Joe Land.

One of the things I tried to do in the store, which was interesting, may have been the forerunner for the introduction of a Japanese-made bowling ball eventually introduced in our country. My brother Charlie was still running the merchandise division of his previous billiard and bowling supply company in Chicago. He had always been somewhat inventive but never quite made the big one. At one time during World War II, he tried to make a substitute bowling ball out of laminated lignum vitae wood when rubber was on the critical list and in short supply and bowling balls were not able to be manufactured to meet the demand during the war. The laminated sections of the balls failed to hold together after frequent use.

MW: Bowling balls were normally made out of hard rubber?

Sennett: Yes, hard rubber. I asked Charlie to consider other substitute materials for bowling balls to propose to Japanese manufacturers who might be interested in bringing a cheaper, more competitive ball to the market. I contacted the Japanese consulate and a Japanese trading firm in San Francisco and through them got in touch with three companies in Japan who indicated the desirability of manufacturing and exporting a Japanese bowling ball. Bob Land gave me full rein to pursue this. I did and eventually two of the Japanese firms asked me for a "formula" for the manufacture of the ball. Charlie provided the concept for molded plastic balls and the ideas for their manufacture. We had no contract and no agreement except that the Japanese would provide sample bowling balls and if they were satisfactory, Land Brothers would be given the national distributorship. The sample balls from both companies did not meet the requirements specified by the American Bowling Congress. The balls had to be in balance. They had to be

spherical, without deformations. The balls were neither in balance nor were they perfect spheres. So obviously there was a lot more work to do before Japanese bowling balls could be imported for sale. We were not able to take advantage of that initial contact because Japanese balls were perfected years after I left Land Brothers and Land Brothers dropped the project after I left the company.

SETTLING IN PALO ALTO

Sennett: With a loan from my brother-in-law, while my family was still in Chicago, I was able to get enough money for a down payment to buy a house. In those years of lower interest rates and relatively low housing prices, I was able to buy a modern, three-bedroom, two-bath home for \$19,000 in a prime area in Palo Alto. Gussie was still in Chicago and she agreed that I should get the house before the family moved to California. We bought a nice place, the nicest home we ever lived in in our lives, in Palo Alto. Gussie and the kids moved out in August and they all loved our new place. We settled in to live in that home in Palo Alto with Gussie getting a job in town and the kids starting school in September.

MW: That was '57?

Sennett: In August and September of that year. Politically, I had decided after attending some meetings of the Communist party in California and keeping up with some of the discussion that was going on in the Communist party nationally--

MW: Now, when you talk about meetings of the Communist party in California, you are talking about small clubs?

Sennett: Yes, I was transferred into the Palo Alto club. Except for a meeting with Mickey Lima, the district organizer of the Communist party, I did not get involved with any other party body other than the club. I told Lima that I was not planning to take on any assignments. All I wanted to do was to attend club meetings in Palo Alto.

MW: Was that a big club?

Sennett: No, it was not very large. I think it had about twenty members.

MW: What kind of people belonged?

Sennett: In the main, they were middle-class people, homeowners, a few retired, one a teacher.

MW: University people at all?

Sennett: A few university people, but in the main they seemed to be small business people and some office workers.

MW: Not your normal industrial proletariat?

Sennett: No, it was not. There were a few professional people, too.

MW: Did you find it a sympatico group or did you feel uncomfortable with them?

Sennett: No, I didn't feel uncomfortable. It was that part of the membership staying on after the big political brouhaha. There were quite a number of people who had been members, but I didn't get to know most of them because they had already left the party. But the club was low key, there were no hot discussions going on at the time when I was transferred into it.

MW: But you apparently didn't establish the kind of close relationship with those people as a group that you had had with the groups that you had worked with in Chicago.

Sennett: No. I was new to the area and didn't live in Palo Alto for very long. I didn't try to influence the club to my point of view. I did more listening than I did talking at that time.

MW: You were really then apparently just sort of going through the motions because you had apparently already made up your mind to leave.

Sennett: Yes, that was the case, and I was still trying to make a hard and fast decision about leaving and since I had not, I kind of tagged along.

MW: But making the hard and fast decision involves how you leave, do you go quietly or do you make a fuss?

Sennett: That is correct and it still involved the uncertainty: Do I leave the party after all I have gone through? Do I make the break even though there is no political substitute? What about all my old friends who are still members? Where do I go from here? All of those things were still going through my mind and the decision did not come easy. It took me over a year for me to make it.

MW: When you made that decision, did you have at all the feeling that you had wasted your life up to that point?

Sennett: Definitely not! I felt that what I did as a party member was mainly positive. I made many mistakes on my own and there were things I said and actions I had undertaken that I regretted. But most issues and actions that were undertaken by the party remain as a positive contribution to American society. The party's work benefitted millions of people, advanced good causes, and made a lot of important and necessary movements possible. Some important and beneficial legislation in our country, nationally, state, and locally, was enacted as a result of party initiatives. The Communist party did yeoman work in spurring trade union organization. My life was enriched by having been a Communist. My regret was the disarray in the Communist movement that had set in and the failure of American Communists to transcend the failures and aberrations of the Soviet reality. I felt that the Communist movement had developed more socially conscious people than any other [party] of comparable size. It educated its members and sympathizers to think of the needs of society as a whole and not simply the narrow needs of self.

PUBLIC RESIGNATION

Sennett: When I finally decided to resign, it was because I concluded that a new type of Socialist organization was needed and that democratic socialism was no longer compatible with continued party membership. I had been a member of the Young Communist League and the Communist party for twenty-seven years, from 1931 until 1958. I met with a number of leaders of the Communist party in California who felt the way I did and we decided to resign together publicly. A number of us had been open functionaries and we were identified as known Communists. We agreed that instead of simply walking out as individuals we would make a public statement to the membership of the party. We were not going to hold press conferences or send our statement to the commercial press. We sent it to the national committee and the state committees of California and Illinois.

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MW: You were just commenting when the tape ended on your decision to make a public statement indicating your resignation from the Communist party.

Sennett: This statement was signed by twenty-five members of the Communist party and, in looking at it today as I am relating this, I note that most signers did not give their full name even though this was called a public statement. The reason was that some people

felt that they might be putting their jobs in jeopardy if they admitted that they had been Communists.

MW: They assumed that the FBI didn't know that they were members of the party?

Sennett: If they already were working, or looking for work, a public statement would give the FBI some additional excuse to visit employers as a form of pressure to get ex-Communists to cooperate.

MW: But this cuts both ways, too. Those people who were well known like yourself, by making a public statement of this kind, it's not exactly a public recanting but it is a public announcement that you are no longer a party member and are publicly leaving the party and, therefore, should no longer be stigmatized by people who were concerned about communism.

Sennett: As far as the FBI is concerned, that didn't cut any ice because if you did not become an informer after leaving the party, you would still be haunted by them.

MW: Yes, it might not cut any ice with the FBI, but it might with the general public or with the central employers. You could say, "Yes, I was a Communist, but I publicly left and here's my statement indicating this and here are the attacks on me by the party functionaries in the party newspaper, et cetera, et cetera." In other words, whatever else the FBI might think, here is the evidence that I am no longer a Communist.

Sennett: Of course, that was not the reason why we issued the statement. We didn't think in terms of providing evidence that we were no longer Communists. We were mostly concerned with the political implications of our leaving. As we saw it, the socialist movement as a whole, and those of us who issued this statement felt that we should not simply disband and give up our beliefs by leaving the Communist party. We didn't want to form a new organization, but we were trying to get the attention of our former comrades so that they, too, would continue to uphold that which was valid in our basic beliefs.

The signers of the statement were most of the leading people of the Communist party of California in addition to myself from Illinois. Among them were Loretta Starvus, Louise Todd, and Oleta O'Conner Yates, who had been the chair of the Communist party of northern California. Frank Carlson, Mort Newman, Henry Steinberg, Leon Kaplan, Celeste Strack, Don Wheeldin, and Martha Wheeldin were part of the leadership of the Communist party in southern California.

I sent copies of this statement to a number of my associates and friends in Illinois. I felt while I didn't agree with the statement in its entirety, this was the thrust of my thinking.

MW: Do you remember who drafted the statement?

Sennett: The statement was drafted by Oleta O'Conner Yates and Frank Carlson and, I believe, Celeste Strack.

MW: Did they approach you and say, "We have decided to quit and we are going to issue this statement. Do you want to sign it?" Or were there meetings of this group?

Sennett: No, there were meetings of the group in parts. I lived in northern California at that time and I met Frank Carlson and Henry Steinberg in southern California. I was in touch with Oleta Yates and Louise Todd in northern California and they showed me a copy of the draft statement.

MW: This was an event in which you didn't really take the leadership then?

Sennett: No, I did not, although when the statement appeared, I was contacted by Mickey Lima, who accused me of coming out of Chicago and being the person who stirred up this movement to convince party members to leave the organization.

MW: [laughs] An outside agitator?

Sennett: That's correct. In Lima's eyes I was the outside agitator.

MW: I think this is a very interesting event and I'd like to see if we could nail down precisely as much as possible of how this came about. Who was the instigator of this group resignation?

Sennett: I am not sure that there was one instigator. Frank Carlson seemed to be the coordinator but I first learned about it before it was drafted from Oleta.

MW: And you knew this was in the works?

Sennett: It was not clearly outlined and there was no statement, but there was discussion about whether there would be any value in people who were planning to drop out of [the party] doing it collectively and making it public. That was the main issue and I had thought about that myself and agreed that it should be done. Frank Carlson came up to northern California to discuss and finalize the draft.

REACTIONS OF PARTY COMRADES

- MW: Did word of this get around before it actually happened, so that other members of the party might come and try to head it off?
- Sennett: I didn't know of anything along that line since I did not know much of the membership of the Communist party in California. I did not hear of it except from the people who participated in the statement.
- MW: Had there been any public resignation prior to this?
- Sennett: Not that I know of.
- MW: Not in California at any rate?
- Sennett: No, not in California.
- MW: Did the Daily Worker or People's World publish the statement?
- Sennett: They did not.
- MW: Did they publish news of it having occurred?
- Sennett: I don't recall. I think there may have been some reference to it in the People's World.
- MW: They did publish Lightfoot's critique of it subsequently.
- Sennett: That's true. I am almost certain that it was not in the Daily Worker. It may have been referred to in a news story in criticism, but I don't recall that they specifically quoted from the statement or let people know what the gist of that statement meant.
- MW: You characterize it as an open statement. In what sense was it an open statement if it didn't get published?
- Sennett: We had decided ourselves that it was open to be communicated to people with whom we had been associated.
- MW: Meaning members of the party?
- Sennett: Primarily members of the party.
- MW: So what does that mean, a mailing?

Sennett: I mailed this statement probably to fifty of my friends in Illinois and I don't know what the others did. Claude Lightfoot, the district chairman of the Communist party, criticized me and warned the members of Illinois against my efforts to persuade people to leave the party, according to his interpretation. He said that I had the opportunity to express my views in the Communist party over a whole period of time and he said my views were not acceptable. He characterized the statement as an "antiparty" act. Some of my former associates agreed with Claude's assessment and I lost a few good friends in the process.

MW: I am sure you remember a number of the anti-Communist books of former Communists that came out during the McCarthy period which argued that you couldn't ever leave the Communist party, that the Communist party owned you somewhat like the Mafia, they owned you body and soul and it was impossible to get out. Your story indicates that it was relatively easy to get out and you could more or less get out any way you wanted. Now, was that always true?

Sennett: I don't understand those stories. After all, the Communist party could not put you in jail and the most that could happen is that the Communist party might issue a statement declaring you an enemy of the party or they might expel you even though you may have resigned. That's about the extent of it.

MW: Now, that could be fairly important for people whose whole life was bound up in party activity--the social life and everything bound up. To become ostracized is kind of a heavy psychological burden to carry.

Sennett: That's true, but while this was probably the stance that most party members would have taken in the past, that was not the case in the period that I am talking about. The fact was, even Communist leaders took different positions. A few Communist leaders are my friends to this day but a number of others are no longer my friends currently. It has a lot to do not only with their choice, but with my choice as well.

An example of party dogmatism and callousness comes to mind in dealing with people who differed from the current party line. Two people who became very good friends of mine, Jim and Edna Whitehouse [spells name], felt the wrath of the party in 1949 in the following way:

Jim Whitehouse had been a captain in the OSS during World War II and he parachuted behind enemy lines and was in contact with Yugoslav partisans. He got to know them and to respect them very highly. He was a member of the Communist party as was his wife, Edna. At the time when Tito and his party were expelled from the Communist Information Bureau in 1948, the Communist party of the

United States agreed with the Soviet line that Tito was a Fascist agent. All American members were expected to take that same position.

Jim Whitehouse, who usually supported the party line, could not swallow that. He insisted that this was something he couldn't accept. He said he couldn't believe this and he could not go along with it. He was eventually brought up on charges and expelled from the Communist party for maintaining that position. His wife, Edna, was then approached about Jim's intransigence and was told that in view of Jim's position on Yugoslavia she should not fraternize with her husband! That, of course, meant divorce and Edna was not about to divorce Jim. She very reluctantly dropped out of the Communist party.

But this did not prevent Jim or Edna from continuing to be supportive of the Communist party.

MW: What ultimately happened to him?

Sennett: Many years later Jim committed suicide. This had nothing to do with his expulsion from the party in 1949 as his death took place in 1972.

MW: These were people in Chicago?

Sennett: No, these were people who were Californians who lived in the San Mateo peninsula. I had become part of a discussion group there where I met Jim and Edna.

JOINING THE EX-PARTY MEMBER NETWORK

Sennett: The discussion group consisted mainly of ex-Communists.

MW: So this was not a Communist party discussion group, but a general discussion group of primarily people who had been Communists.

Sennett: Yes, it was kind of a freewheeling independent group. Gussie and I both became members of that group almost as soon as we moved to California.

MW: Tell me a little bit more about this discussion group. It sort of sounds a little bit like a halfway house.

Sennett: It might have been. People were anxious to exchange opinions on current events, the Communist countries, and American politics. It wasn't intended to involve them in any activities or any new

organization. I remember a time when Vincent Hallinan, a prominent Bay Area attorney who had run for president on the Progressive party ticket in 1952, led a discussion at my house on the upcoming 1960 presidential elections. He was for a Socialist ticket in that race and in congressional contests as well.

MW: Had he been a Communist?

Sennett: As far as I know, he was not a member of the Communist party, but he certainly accepted much of the Communist party program. He dealt with the bankruptcy of the Democratic and Republican parties and the fact that they were both twin evils. Thus, he concluded, only a Socialist ticket could present an honest alternative.

Some of us disagreed with him and indicated that this was not the time for Socialist candidacies since there was a dis-united and tiny left in the country.

Hallinan, a rather short-tempered man, took issue, particularly with some remarks that I made with reference to the futility of Socialist candidacies at this stage, and just walked out of the discussion, saying, "I am not going to sit here and listen to that crap any more," and that was the end of it. I don't know why he did it except for his temper because there were honest differences of opinion on that matter among the group.

MW: I would imagine that this discussion group filled an important psychological need for people who had been involved in such an intensive organization as the CP previously.

Sennett: I certainly enjoyed it. It offered me two possibilities. I am a political animal and I certainly didn't find it easy to just go to my job and forget everything that I had been involved in. It also helped me to meet a lot of nice people, a number of whom became my good friends. It was interesting and enjoyable.

A JOB OFFER FROM COLORTAN

Sennett: Milt Foreman, an old friend of mine whom I had met when I was in the army, came to San Francisco and asked me if I would consider taking a job in a company that he had just become associated with called Colortan. The basis for this company's product was an invention by a man named Larry Grover who had developed specially built converters which would over-voltage lightbulbs to produce a color spectrum for photography and for more concentrated light than arc lights. This was a technological improvement over the equipment then being used for movies, the

stage, and in printing processes. Milt was a welding engineer and had worked at various shipyards. He was a very creative person who had been a member of the Communist party. He was given a partnership, since Larry Grover needed Milt's technical talents as well as his business acumen. Milt took hold of the company and was beginning to enlarge the company's business.

MW: What was his basis for inviting you, simply a friendship or did he have some knowledge of your having business skills?

Sennett: At that time, I didn't really have business skills except for my experiences as an organizer for the Communist party and in the Progressive movement. My job at Land Brothers was also helpful.

MW: Of which he was aware?

Sennett: Milt knew me during World War II when I was based in Keesler Field and he was working in Pascagoula, Mississippi. He was looking for someone with an administrative and general organizational background. He wanted a purchasing agent who could do more than that since this was a small, growing company.

MW: Now, why would he think you could be a good purchasing agent for a company that has an esoteric product that you don't know anything about?

Sennett: Milt's idea was that you can teach people about a product or service but you can't always find people with a wide range of generalized experiences who can be more useful than particular technicians. The range of my political experience in administration, promotion, publicity, research, speaking, organizing, writing had a great value in business. He sized me up as someone who could learn the job quickly and handle more as the company grew.

I had been working at Land Brothers for almost a year and it was almost as though I was experimenting with what field I wanted to be in. I had decided that I did not want to stay in the retail business. I had to work three nights a week, a half day on Saturdays and on alternate Sundays. The long commute from Palo Alto to San Francisco was wearying. When Milt approached me, I was amenable because I thought I would have a better opportunity getting in on the ground floor with Colortran. My only regret was leaving San Francisco.

Gussie and I talked it over and even though she wasn't anxious to move she deferred to me again. She had a job as an office secretary in Palo Alto. She liked it where we were, but she made this concession to my feeling about getting out of the retail business.

POLITICAL STRAINS, FAMILY STRAINS

MW: By the way, during this period had she participated in the discussion group?

Sennett: She was a member of the discussion group.

MW: Her political activities really didn't parallel yours all the way?

Sennett: They were parallel but with much less involvement. Even though she was not an aggressive and normally not an outspoken person about everything that went on, she did form certain conclusions about the party, about where it was going, and generally she agreed with the position that I took. She left the party of her own volition.

MW: Afterwards? How long after?

Sennett: I don't recall. It may have been several months after I did.

MW: Did you ever have political disagreements during this period? I mean this was a very traumatic decision for you. You must have had a lot of discussions about it.

Sennett: Not with Gussie, no.

MW: Apparently, each of you formed your own opinions about what was going on and what needed to be done, and it just happened that they ended up being the same opinions?

Sennett: It followed that course, yes.

MW: She was an independent-minded person politically?

Sennett: She was independent minded, but her political actions were influenced by mine. My aggressive participation led to her being a low key opposite to me. And I was probably largely responsible for her developing a feeling that she could not rely on her own opinions without consulting me. I was more assertive and more domineering in my political thinking to the point where I may have crushed her spirit somewhat as a result of our relationship.

MW: That is a pretty strong phrase, crushed her spirit.

Sennett: By that, I mean her open assertiveness. She might have hesitated to pursue [things] because she did have opinions which she did express in her own quiet way. But I usually took such a strong stand if I felt that she was wrong that I would talk her down. It

got to the point where she would not stick up for her opinions even though there were times when she was more correct than I.

MW: In retrospect, do you recall where she may have been right but simply gave up because she was overpowered?

Sennett: Her attitude toward certain party bureaucrats. Her judgments about some party people.

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MW: Just before the tape ended, I asked you about Gussie. You indicated that you had had some disagreements about individuals and judgments of personalities and so forth.

Sennett: Yes, we did. She had different estimates about certain people that she met in the course of our being in the party and I did, too. Of course, as time went on, we were able to make friends that we agreed about mutually and over a whole period of time, therefore, we had more agreements than we had disagreements.

MW: But was she a better judge of character than you were?

Sennett: [pause] She may well have been. Yes, I would say she could have been. I would have to think back about people along that line.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA JOB WITH COLORTRAN

MW: Okay, then we've got the discussion group and the new job at Colortran, and how did that go?

Sennett: I took the job and--

MW: You moved?

Sennett: I moved to southern California by myself, just as I had from Chicago to northern California. I left the family behind because we hadn't sold the house, and I had to go to work.

MW: I bet you hated to leave that house.

Sennett: I certainly did. I was in love with that house and that area in Palo Alto. When I got down to southern California, we couldn't buy a house because we had money tied up in the Palo Alto house in any case, so we were going to rent. Fortunately, I was informed by a friend that the State of California had homes which were temporarily available for rental. The state was picking them up

as a result of the development of the freeway system. We rented a house next to the freeway that was available for a moderate rental.

It took only a matter of a couple of months before the house in Palo Alto was sold and the family, with the exception of my daughter Barbara, moved to southern California. By this time, Barbara was eighteen years old, and she had gotten a job with the Royal McBee Typewriter Company. She wanted to continue working and living in Palo Alto.

MW: What sort of money were you making during this period?

Sennett: Not very much. At Land Brothers I was making probably about, oh, nine thousand dollars a year.

MW: Was Gussie working, too?

Sennett: Yes, she had a job.

MW: So you had a dual income, which brought the family income to what?

Sennett: It was a family income of about fifteen thousand dollars a year.

MW: Did you make more when you went to Colortran?

Sennett: Not much; initially, I started at Colortran for \$150 a week. It was a small company and it was based upon the fact that they didn't have much money, but it had great promise. But at Colortran I generally worked a forty-hour week as compared with fifty to sixty at Land Brothers. It was precisely over the question of salary and future opportunity that I eventually left Colortran. My pay at Colortran after about a year was \$200 a week. I was supposed to get a bonus if the company made a certain profit, but we didn't make it that first year.

MW: You were always working for Milt Foreman?

Sennett: Yes, I was.

MW: Did he stay with them?

Sennett: He certainly did. He built it into an eminently successful company, bought out his partner, and sold it to a public company, making a small fortune in the process.

MW: Did it damage your relationship with him that you left?

Sennett: No. We weren't as friendly as we had been before but we maintained an infrequent contact thereafter.

- MW: But it was strictly over salary that you left?
- Sennett: It was over salary and bonus calculation. But even more, I welcomed the opportunity offered by the Strick Corporation.
- MW: Strick was another opportunity that came along?
- Sennett: Yes, that came about at a later date. Before getting involved with Strick, I helped in the organization of a political discussion group in the Los Angeles area.
- MW: Did this include some of those who had signed the resignation?
- Sennett: Yes, it did.

JOINING THE CDC IN STUDIO CITY

- MW: Were you active politically with that group in any way?
- Sennett: Separately, I joined the California Democratic Council Club in Studio City. I got involved in some local political work with them.
- MW: So were there a number of ex-CP types that went into the CDC?
- Sennett: Yes, there were. Of course, I didn't know them, as I didn't know most CP members. But I learned who some of them were in time.
- MW: So the allegations of the Republicans that the Democratic party was infiltrated by all of these lefties was not exactly off target then.
- Sennett: It depends upon how the word infiltration is used. At this point, I joined. I didn't consider that infiltration and I sincerely was interested in building CDC as an organization and working within the Democratic party to help elect capable and progressive officials to office.
- MW: But was there an organized entry into CDC by former Communists?
- Sennett: No, I did not see any evidence of it when I joined and I don't believe that that happened prior to that. It wasn't just a matter of assignment even in my experience when I was active in the CP. Despite the fact that the Communist party was a disciplined political vanguard as it called itself--it made some assignments for people or suggested to people that they get into some movements and some organizations--but basically it had a lot to do with the inclination of individuals.

- MW: Did you get the impression that the party members were making a political project out of CDC?
- Sennett: I got the impression that the party was deeply committed to working within CDC.
- MW: So once again, the Republicans were not altogether off target on that. Of course, they were saying that the Communists were controlling CDC, which is still again another matter.
- Sennett: They didn't control the Studio City club.
- MW: Were you active at a statewide level? Did you go to the Fresno conferences?
- Sennett: Yes, I did, but only as a representative of the Studio City club.
- MW: But did you get any impression that there was active Communist manipulation of CDC?
- Sennett: No. In fact, I felt that a little Communist participation at top levels would have been very helpful!
- MW: Okay, that's an interesting point to me because having been in CDC myself, I was very much aware of all of the allegations by the Republicans that Communists had penetrated the CDC and that this made the organization terribly vulnerable to Republican criticism. Therefore, it should not take positions in support of recognition of China, et cetera, which would simply confirm the Republican stereotype of the organization.
- Sennett: I heard some of those charges.
- MW: Yes, it was a great period! [laughter] Okay, so you had the southern California group, which was very similar to the one up here, right?
- Sennett: Yes.
- MW: Both social and political?
- Sennett: Very similar. Gussie got a job in southern California after the family moved down—Gussie moved down with my daughter, Judy, who was still in school.

REJOINING THE STRICK CORPORATION

Sennett: After about a year at Colortran, I made what was to be my final job change. Bill Miller, an old Chicago friend who had moved to Philadelphia to take a job there, met Sol Katz, whom I had gotten to know in the Strick Corporation when I went to work there in Chicago in 1950. But Katz was now the president of the Strick Corporation, a manufacturer of truck trailers, and the company, the Strick Corporation, was now part [of] and owned by the Fruehauf Corporation. Katz had come to southern California to attend a trucking association convention in Los Angeles and he was told by Bill Miller that I was living in Los Angeles, so he looked me up.

MW: Were Bill Miller and Katz old party associates?

Sennett: Certainly not Katz; Katz was the son-in-law of Frank Strick, who was the owner of the Strick Corporation. Frank Strick had died in 1951, shortly after I left the company, and Katz eventually became the president of the company. The Strick family sold their company to the Fruehauf Corporation, the largest manufacturer of truck trailers in the world. Strick was now a division, but Katz was known as the president of the division.

Katz remembered me from the time when he was in training with his father-in-law at the new Chicago plant where I had worked.

MW: Oh, that's right. You worked at the Strick plant in Chicago.

Sennett: That's correct. Katz knew I was a Communist. The FBI had informed Strick of that fact. He asked Bill Miller whether I was still in the Communist movement, and Bill told him that I had left.

Katz said, "I remember Sennett as a man that I thought would make a good salesman and I want to talk to him about that." And he did. He asked me whether I was happy with the job I held and whether I wanted to make more money. Strick was planning to build a service branch in Los Angeles (its main plant was in Philadelphia) and they were looking for someone who could be trained to run that kind of an operation. Katz invited me to make the trip to Philadelphia to be interviewed by his sales manager, Phil Orzeck, and some of the other management of the company.

I was offered a starting job as a salesman of truck trailers with the understanding that I would then undertake to open a sales facility which would sell new and used trailers and factory parts.

That sounded interesting to me and I was offered a higher base salary, a commission arrangement, and the use of a company car. I liked the idea and I took the Strick job in January of 1960.

We opened the branch facility on a five-acre site that I was able to lease in Vernon, California, a suburb of Los Angeles. We stocked some new trailers that were built at the Philadelphia plant at our facility and we also took used trailers that previously had to be either wholesaled or sent back to Chicago where Strick also had a facility or to Philadelphia. But since we now had a site and we had people working on sales, we began to sell used trailers out of that lot as well. We also sold trailer replacement parts. We did begin to stock parts, and I hired some people to work in the facility on parts and in the office and another person working on sales. I then became the manager for Strick of the Los Angeles facility.

MW: In essence, this job was simply a trailer rental. I mean this operation was strictly trailer rental, wasn't it?

Sennett: No, at that time it was strictly trailer and parts sales. Initially I called only on large size fleet accounts. When we opened the factory branch, we began to call on smaller companies as well.

In 1961 Katz suggested that we consider renting and leasing trailers. We had been renting out some of our used trailers that sat around the yard—for short periods of time to truckers who needed an extra trailer now and then. Katz thought we ought to put some new trailers into the starting of a leasing business. I was given ten trailers to start this new business. We made up some decals calling that operation Strick Leasing. Since we had expanded into a new business we held up on building a service facility because that required hiring mechanics and having a shop and it really would have diverted our efforts.

MW: Is there any relationship between this business which is, in essence, trucking and the work you did in the Spanish Civil War?

Sennett: No. I was dealing with truck trailers in Los Angeles. The trucks in Spain were used to bring men and materials to the front. Our leasing business provided the equipment only. We ourselves were not involved in transporting the goods.

The ten new trailers that we put into the leasing operation initially were quickly rented out. Katz arranged to provide us with fifty more. After additional infusions of equipment we were able to get the Fruehauf Corporation's agreement to build a leasing division. We decided to structure it as a rental company

separate from trailer sales. We called the new division Rentco. I began to set up branches in other cities but for a while, I still handled the Strick branch, Strick sales of new and used trailers and Strick parts, in Los Angeles. I hired a salesman to work on sales exclusively and another for Rentco on rentals.

MW: Did you transfer the rental that had been under Strick over to Rentco?

Sennett: Yes, and we changed to Rentco decals.

MW: How many people did you have working under you?

Sennett: When we made that division of labor, and that was only in early 1963, we already had about 150 trailers in the Strick fleet under Strick lease. But then we transferred all of that and any other lease fleet trailers to the Rentco side. Up to that time—this was 1963—we only had five people working in the whole facility to do both jobs. When we developed Rentco in 1963, we then started to build another branch in northern California because it was easiest for me to cover from southern California. Then we built a third branch that same year in Chicago and thereafter we went on to build a total of thirteen branches in thirteen cities by 1964.

MW: Who was the president of Rentco?

Sennett: There was no president of Rentco. I became the general manager of Rentco.

MW: Which was the top chief executive officer?

Sennett: Yes, because we were building Rentco as a division of Strick which, in itself, was a division of Fruehauf.

MW: Whom did you report to?

Sennett: I reported to Sol Katz.

MW: Who was?

Sennett: Who was president of Strick, but who reported to Bill Grace, the president of Fruehauf.

MW: Rentco was a separate corporation?

Sennett: No, it was not a separate corporation. It was an adjunct of Strick.

MW: I see, so it didn't have a board of directors.

Sennett: No board of directors, no.

MW: A subsidiary then, I suppose?

Sennett: That's right, but when we built branches in other cities, I moved out of the branch office and we set up an office elsewhere in Los Angeles. By 1964, we had a staff of fourteen people in the Los Angeles office and an administrative/finance office of twelve people in Philadelphia.

MW: In 1965, Strick was divested from Fruehauf by an order of the Federal Trade Commission. At that point, the Strick management group, of which I had then become a part, consisted of the Strick production and sales facilities and Rentco under Strick administration. Katz suggested that we raise the money to buy the Strick division from Fruehauf and set up our independent company just as Strick had been independent in the past. Katz was well connected with the means for borrowing the money needed. He was able to get the Prudential Life Insurance Company and an investment banking firm, Lehman Brothers of Wall Street, to provide most of the capital needed in order to buy Strick, the company. The company was bought for fifteen million dollars and I became a director of Strick with an equity position in the new Strick Corporation. However, the purchase did not include Rentco which Fruehauf wanted to keep as its own leasing division.

After I accepted Katz's offer to become one of the equity owners, Bill Grace, the president of Fruehauf, asked me to meet with him to discuss my staying with the corporation. He asked me to consider staying with Fruehauf because he said that he believed that Strick was undercapitalized and would not be successful as an independent venture. Of course, he was making a sales pitch for me to stay on as the general manager of Rentco. At that point, he offered me a vice-presidency with Fruehauf. In addition, he offered me a more generous salary than Strick was offering me at the time.

MW: Roughly six years after you left the Communist party, you were offered a vice-presidency in one of the big capitalist corporations.

Sennett: That's right, and I was being offered a salary of forty thousand dollars a year to stay with Fruehauf, with more money as our division became larger and more profitable and with a special bonus based on division profitability. The Strick venture was an undercapitalized company, but I was fascinated with Katz's creative approach to business. I felt that I would be able to go a lot further working with Katz than I could with what I considered a more stodgy corporation like Fruehauf.

MW: When you left the retail business, Land Company, the reason that prompted you to leave--the primary reason that prompted you to leave--was you didn't like the retail business because you had to work alternate Sundays and you had to work nights a lot. What was your work schedule when you got involved with Strick?

Sennett: When I got involved with Rentco and later with Strick, I worked longer hours than I would have worked in a retail store. But by this time, I had become fascinated with the business and I did a lot of traveling. It was quite challenging. My thinking at the time when I worked for Land Brothers was that work is something you do for a minimum amount of hours and the less you do at work, the more you will enjoy yourself after work. So with that attitude, I certainly did not like working nights and Saturdays and Sundays. When I went to work for Strick/Rentco, and eventually Transport Pool, I worked as though this were part of a socially important cause. That was possible because I was stimulated, inspired, and enthused. Work became fun for me. It was a different kind of job than the humdrum kind of job that most workers have. I was not alienated from my work; I was fascinated by it.

MW: So the Strick Corporation became the new Communist party for you.

Sennett: For me in practice it did.

MW: What did all of this do to your personal life?

Sennett: It certainly had an effect upon my personal life.

XIII ENTERING THE CORPORATE WORLD

[Interview 14: September 10, 1982]##

MW: At the end of our last session, you had joined the Strick Corporation. What happened next?

Sennett: The main assignment that I had undertaken was to build a new truck trailer leasing company to compete with Rentco. This would be part of Strick. But I also undertook some other responsibilities until the new Strick leasing company got off the ground. I became the president of several independent service facilities that were now owned by the company. They were in Denver, Colorado, North Bergen, New Jersey (near New York), and Charlotte, North Carolina. In addition, I was responsible for the Strick service shop in Chicago and the Los Angeles branch facility that I had started while Strick was still part of the Fruehauf Corporation. The Strick service facilities handled trailer repairs and warranties on new trailers, used trailer sales, and part sales. There were from seventy-five to one hundred workers each in Charlotte, Chicago, and North Bergen, and about twenty to twenty-five workers in Denver.

BUILDING UP TRANSPORT POOL TRUCK LEASING

Sennett: The new truck trailer leasing company was called Transport Pool. This was an available pool of truck trailers at branches around the country for short-term rentals or longer term leases to truckers who were common carriers and to private carriers (non-transportation companies delivering their own merchandise), truck rental companies, steamship lines, and railroads.

MW: Was this an innovation in the industry?

Sennett: It was innovative, starting with Rentco, as a nationwide service. There had been some small leasing companies in a number of cities, but there was no national leasing company that was put together like Rentco. Rentco was essentially the first. Some companies were leasing truck trailers for piggyback (trailer on a flat rail car) use. The railroads used them and some trucking companies who did piggyback work also rented those trailers from time to time. Our concept was to go beyond it and concentrate on the truckers, who were much more numerous. The market for potential accounts was much greater. Piggyback users, primarily railroads, ended up leasing thousands of rental trailers, but the market was narrow as there were probably no more than fifty railroads across the whole country.

MW: When you rented these trailers or when you leased them, did the lessee then repaint them and put his own insignia on them or did they have your signs on them?

Sennett: Those truckers who rented trailers short term used them with our logos. Some would add decals of their own. More often those leasing for longer terms would install their own signs. We rented on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis.

MW: Did you keep responsibility for maintenance of them while they were being leased?

Sennett: We did on some leases. It depended on the specific contracts. We had maintenance leases and nonmaintenance leases. We would stipulate in the maintenance leases what we would do in the way of maintenance. Trailers are not like a truck. There is no engine, and maintenance is minimal, but we understood, of course, that we had to replace tires and brake lining as they wore out. If there was any damage, the lessee was responsible either directly or through insurance. We didn't wash the trailers unless they were on short-term rental and it came back to us. Those who had them out on long term lease took that responsibility.

MW: It was a successful business, I gather.

Sennett: It became a very successful business. We did market studies on the use of all types of trailers. Truckers--normally the common carriers--would buy equipment to handle the kind of freight they handled. There were double trailers and eventually there was some experimentation with triple trailers, three trailers being hauled by a one-truck tractor. Some needed to use open tops, flatbeds, moving vans, refrigerated trailers. There are differences in length, height, and number of axles. We offered over thirty types

of trailers--an equipment mix to provide those who hauled freight with the right kind of trailer when and as needed. Prior to the pool of equipment available for lease, large trucking companies were buying various types of trailers. Our studies showed that some handlers would buy certain types of trailers even though they only got about three months' or four months' use for the year. Some would get accounts who needed special equipment and they would buy trailers of the type needed only to lose those accounts to competitors. They would end up with unneeded equipment.

We successfully promoted the concept that truckers and private carriers didn't need to buy equipment when there was infrequent use. We educated them so that they would judge whether to buy or lease depending on the utilization of each type of equipment. We convinced truckers to reduce the base fleet that they owned. They would buy less and use our equipment for peak periods above the norm of their traffic. And they would also rent or lease the kind of special equipment that was not in their base fleet. We convinced carriers to sell their excess or infrequently used equipment and we even bought trailers from some of our customers.

POLITICS AND THE TRUCKING INDUSTRY

MW: As you became more and more involved in the trucking business, you must have become aware of the role of the trucking industry in lobbying legislatures and Congress for tax benefits, highway access, and all of those things.

Sennett: Oh, yes.

MW: Did you ever get involved in any of that?

Sennett: No, I didn't. I consciously avoided involvement of that kind with the owners and the management of the trucking companies. It would have been a little bit difficult for me, since I was in disagreement with them on many questions of regulation and entry into the business, to become active in their associations. I appeared and spoke before associations from time to time about the advantages of trailer rental and trailer leasing, but I stayed away from the political ends of the business. Had I become a member, and I was invited by state and national associations to do so, I would have been forced to take the kind of management positions with which I could not agree.

MW: What were your basic disagreements, about the role of government regulation of the trucking industry?

Sennett: Take regulation, for example. All common carriers had restricted or expanded authority granted by federal or state governments. Independent truckers without like authority were restricted and were prohibited from offering their service. Secondly, regulation actually set a price for freight and those prices were by type of commodity, weight, and also by routes. The routes and terms of the service were prescribed. Only when a number of shippers would get together to support a petition for a competitor without authority to provide service would there be a possibility of other entrants getting authority to compete. There has been some modification of that system since partial deregulation but it is far from open competition yet.

MW: From your description, it sounds a little bit like the trucking industry at that time was part of the great capitalist monster that you had been fighting all of the years in the Communist party.

Sennett: Well, it was, to a large extent and it also had a lot to do with highway taxes and highway maintenance. I felt that the truckers were not overtaxed as they claimed and that a great part of the damage done to the highways was actually caused by heavy vehicles and undoubtedly the truckers have the heaviest vehicles. While truckers were lobbying to reduce taxes and put a greater burden upon individual automobiles, I felt that this was unfair and obviously I could not become part of that movement.

There was also a matter of responsibility for accidents caused by heavy rigs. In California, the truckers lobbied and defeated a proposed law which would have provided some special underride equipment to lower the rear of trailers. This would have provided additional bumper protection so that small cars would not be trapped underneath some trailers as a result of an accidental crash on the highways. I felt that this should not be something which the truckers should try to avoid, that they should spend the extra money needed to put underride safeguards on the truck trailers.

Eventually, I wrote an article for one of the trucking industry trade magazines in California to call for support of needed safeguard measures. In an editorial opinion the publication thanked God that the state legislature came to its senses and defeated the proposed underride since it was going to cost a lot of money even if a few people were killed as a result. They equated the question of the money versus the "few" lives that it took. I felt that truckers should have taken the stance that

safety should be the determining factor and if there was a better substitute than the override to achieve that objective, it should be supported. They printed my piece without comment.

My social conscience prevented me from trade association participation. I would have had to oppose them and my opinions would have found little support on many matters.

MW: So operating in that milieu must have been a bit of a strain. You must have felt somewhat uncomfortable shifting from the trade union to the management milieu and finding yourself philosophically in disagreement with them and your conscience constantly stressed.

Sennett: That's a compromise that one makes when involved in business management. Compromises have to be based upon what you really believe and what you might be able to do about it. I calculated that I would have been a voice in the wilderness and it could have affected our business adversely. As a result, I didn't open up a debate or try to bring about changes in the policies of the industry.

MW: In your role as management, did you have a different relationship with the employees of your firm from what was common in the firms that you had had contact with as a trade unionist?

Sennett: Basically, our firm, Transport Pool, was a sales company.

MW: But you said you had about 125 employees in a service shop for which you had responsibility.

Sennett: That was an interim assignment for a short period of time. When Strick became an independent company, after it was divested from Fruehauf, I managed several different companies for about a year. There were local managers in those companies who reported to me. Three of the four facilities involved had union shops. I did not get directly involved with negotiations of wages, hours, and working conditions. I concentrated on sales of parts and service, relying on the local managers to deal directly with the labor force. Eventually I shed all other company responsibilities except for Transport Pool and the leasing business as this was growing the fastest and had the most profitable potential.

Transport Pool was small in the number of people working in the branches. Buffalo, New York had two people; Chicago, seven; Los Angeles, eleven. The average branch (in the United States) was five people. A five-person branch generally consisted of a branch manager, sales person, sales administrator, yard man (checking trailers in and out) and either another sales person or

a maintenance man. In 1976 we had approximately 700 employees with sixty branches in the United States and Canada and twenty-six in ten European countries. As a sales company we were capital intensive. A manufacturing company with the volume of business we were doing would have had about three times the number of employees.

My relations with our workers were generally informal and friendly. I introduced an incentive system which paid rather liberal bonuses to people involved in sales as well as nonsales positions. When we were a public company we also made stock options available.

We didn't overpay in comparison with salary levels in the rest of the transportation industry but in stressing incentives, a large part of our sales force was able to earn between 10 percent and 30 percent above their base salaries for the year. Some of our people were dissatisfied with their earnings and some left because they were able to get better paying jobs elsewhere.

MW: As your business, Transport Pool, grew and prospered did this have a big effect on your lifestyle?

Sennett: While Gussie and I were married it didn't change very much. We lived in the same modest house and except for a new company car almost every year there was essentially no change in lifestyle. I traveled a lot on business and was probably away from home about 50 to 60 percent of the time. As the result of being president of the company, I had some modest perks: better hotels, better restaurants, European, Japanese, and Hawaiian trips, etc. In that sense, I lived a little higher on the hog than I did previously.

SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

MW: How did all of this affect your personal life?

Sennett: My involvement in the business had a serious effect on my personal life. The nature of the job, the fact that I was away from home so often, contributed to the difficulties that I had with Gussie, and contributed largely to our eventual divorce.

MW: Would you attribute the divorce primarily to that or was there political disagreement or anything of that nature?

Sennett: No, there were no political disagreements. It was personal. We had been married about thirty years, counting the time we lived

together before marriage (long before it was openly fashionable to do so). Gussie and I moved in together in 1934. Not long thereafter, as a YCL activist, I took assignments out of Chicago that would keep me away from home for months at a time. Then there was Spain, almost two years, and World War II, another two and a half years. These, too, may well have been contributing factors early in our relationship. It was exacerbated when I went to work for the Strick Corporation.

MW: But you had been away quite a bit of the time as a Communist organizer, too.

Sennett: Yes, I had.

MW: So she must have been used to that.

Sennett: I don't know whether people get used to that. As time goes on there could be a built-up resentment. I know I got tired of all of that travel and undoubtedly she did not enjoy that kind of relationship. The children were grown, there was no longer a political organizational tie, and lonesomeness was a factor.

MW: I don't mean to probe too greatly into your personal life, but I am curious to know whether there is any relationship between that and your political life and whether you found yourself, for example, as your marriage began to come apart, arguing about political matters or about your job or anything like that.

Sennett: No, we never did. In fact, we never had many arguments and our divorce was not the result of a feud or of serious arguments. A process of changing outlooks set in as she and I were growing apart. There was nothing that I could put my finger on specifically except for the fact that I wasn't around as much and I was really immersed in the business. I was probably as immersed in the business as I had been in politics. I spent not only eight hours a day, but days, nights, and weekends devoting myself to building the company. I found it interesting and fascinating. It was a different experience for me. It wasn't the money as much as the challenge and enjoyment in my work. I was lucky to have the kind of a job I did. When I had worked in shops before, I found it boring except for the time when I was organizing a union from the inside. Transport Pool was an adventure, it was fun, and it was profitable. That's where my mind was at the time. I didn't lose my political and social consciousness, but I didn't have time to get involved. About the only thing I would do politically, at home, was to meet with some left friends in discussion groups. At a later time when the Vietnam War took place, I pulled an oar in a group called Business Executives Move for Vietnam Peace. Other than that, most of my time and energies were devoted to business.

- MW: During this period, what was Gussie doing? Did she have continued political interests and activities?
- Sennett: No, she did not. She had dropped out of the party at about the same time that I did and was not involved in any organization. She worked from time to time and went to school part time. She studied piano, went to concerts, gardened, took care of the house, visited with friends and took flying lessons.
- MW: Who took the initiative to dissolve the marriage?
- Sennett: I did. I did that, however, only after it was clear to me that the relationship on her part had cooled significantly. She wanted a temporary separation but not a divorce. On the other hand, I felt that I needed to break it off. I felt also that the job and the separation was affecting my health. I developed some health problems at that particular time that I know now were directly related to that whole process.
- MW: Now, you were separated beginning when?
- Sennett: We were separated in early 1966 and we got divorced in 1967.
- MW: So separation meant that you moved out of the house?
- Sennett: Yes.
- MW: Then in 1967 you said, in effect, "Let's end it and get a divorce," and she agreed to that.
- Sennett: She agreed only because I insisted. She indicated that we ought to take some time and not hurry a divorce.
- MW: Was it an amicable decision? Did you remain friends?
- Sennett: It was amicable but strained. As the years have gone by we have both mellowed. We are and have been friends.
- MW: How old were the children at that time?
- Sennett: Barbara was twenty-six and Judy twenty at the time of our divorce.
- MW: Did you get a lot of flack from them about the home life situation?
- Sennett: No, the children were not happy about the breakup, but they were sympathetic.

MW: So then what did you do? Did your life change markedly after the divorce?

Sennett: No, it didn't change markedly insofar as business was concerned. I spent just as much time, not more or less, in business as I did when I was married.

REMARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Sennett: In Chicago an old friend, Sandra Fielde, and I began going out together. Sandy's husband Jerry Fielde had died a few years back. Sandy and I decided to get married in 1968. She left her long-time job as a health administrator in Chicago and moved with me to San Francisco. I always liked the Bay Area better than Los Angeles and used the occasion of my marriage to Sandy to move the headquarters office to San Francisco as well.

MW: When did you marry Sandy?

Sennett: In 1968.

MW: What was the basis of your relationship with her? Was it that she was a political friend from the past?

Sennett: Oh, yes, she was an oldtime Communist. Her husband, Jerry Fielde, had been the secretary-treasurer of the Farm Equipment Workers Union of the CIO. That was one of the unions expelled by the CIO that was charged with being Communist dominated. It continued as an independent union for many years before it eventually merged with the Auto Workers Union of the CIO. I had been an old friend of both Sandy and Jerry after World War II.

MW: But she was no longer politically active?

Sennett: No, she was not, but she was still a left-wing person and we had essentially the same kind of political and social consciousness.

MW: Now, that marriage was short-lived. Why?

Sennett: I don't know if I can explain that. There didn't seem to be the needed chemistry. Whatever the reason, we parted amicably. I felt that it was the kind of marriage decision people usually go through when they have lost a spouse. I felt that I couldn't live alone, that I needed to have a companion, and I kind of set that as a goal. Unfortunately, I didn't let nature take its course and so didn't feel as happy about the relationship as I thought and

decided that it would be best if we broke it off. So we were separated in 1970 and divorced in 1972.

MW: Is it possible that during this period, you were so fascinated by the game of business that you became something of a workaholic and that the business was really your whole life and there wasn't much left over for a personal life?

Sennett: That could have been part of it. On the other hand, I am also a very gregarious person and I like to meet people and mix with people socially and so it wasn't entirely that one-sided. I like women and I felt that I wanted a new kind of relationship.

MW: So then that marriage broke up in 1972.

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Sennett: I would want to mention that I felt very bad about having moved Sandy away from her home, her job, and her base of friends in Chicago. However, when we got married, Sandy decided to go back to school and even though she was in her late fifties, she took a course in law without having a college degree and passed the bar shortly after we were divorced.

MW: The California bar?

Sennett: Yes. She enjoyed being an attorney and I felt that at least this was some compensation for her having pulled up roots in Chicago.

MW: Is she still a practicing attorney in California?

Sennett: She is semi-retired now, but she takes on some law cases.

MW: Do you keep in touch?

Sennett: Infrequently. However, we're on a talking basis and friendly.

MW: Okay, what is the next important milestone? Is it a business milestone or a personal milestone?

RELATIONSHIP WITH ROSALIE ROSS

Sennett: As long as we're on the personal side of my life, I should deal with the other woman who is in my life now, Rosalie Ross, whom I met through Sandy. Rosalie had met Sandy in Chicago when Rosie was working there in 1968 on a special project for the Medical

Committee on Human Rights. I started dating Rosalie after Sandy and I were separated in 1972.

MW: That was in Chicago?

Sennett: No, in San Francisco. Rosalie is a West Coast person. She is still the woman in my life and we have been living together ever since 1975.

MW: Is she a political person?

Sennett: She is a political person, but was never a Communist and never as far left as I am. She worked with the California Democratic Council in the Democratic party and worked professionally in Planned Parenthood. She has a degree in counseling, and was a director of Planned Parenthood's Contra Costa operation for ten years. It would be very difficult for me to live with a person who at least didn't share some of my social and political thinking. We have our differences politically, but they are not fundamentally so strong that they would make us antagonists.

MW: Were these three women quite similar in character and personality or were they primarily different?

Sennett: Different as far as personality and personal interests. I found that my relationship with Rosalie is one with a woman who is pretty strong in her own opinions as contrasted to mine in a lot of matters. And it's been very helpful to me. It's helped me to better understand what is called the "women's question" in terms of relationships with women and women's independent lives and their independence in the world of politics, business, and social relationships. All three women are quite different in their personalities and in the way that we related to each other.

MW: The common thread is that you share similar social views, I would imagine, with all three women.

Sennett: I think so. Fundamentally, that is there. I find it difficult to think of how people—I can imagine there are such people who live in the same house and who have deep [but differing] political, social, or philosophical views. Especially if they can't talk to each other about them. When it comes to certain fundamental aspects of pursuing one's life, it seems to me that compatibility in terms of what life is all about and rational discourse, though there may be disagreements, is an important aspect of a relationship. If the goals are the same, or close to it, that makes it even better.



Above: Rosalie Ross ca. 1981.

Right: Bill Sennett overlooking the Golden Gateway and, *below*, at home in Tiburon, 1983.



MW: Would you say that with Gussie and Sandy, your relationship with them was more oldfashioned in the sense that these women were more traditional wives who accepted your authority in a relationship, whereas with Rosalie your relationship is based more on the modern notion of equality and that there is no locus of authority?

Sennett: I think that is correct. When I said earlier that Gussie and I hadn't had many arguments, especially serious arguments, it probably would have been better for our relationship had that been the case. Rosalie and I [laughs] have many disagreements and argue a lot, but nevertheless, some arguments are principled. They have made me sit up and take notice about some of my own stubborn perceptions. With Rosalie there is no such thing as submitting to the authority of the husband. Even though Rosalie and I are not legally married, we have lived together long enough to qualify for that status.

THOUGHTS ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

MW: Would you have been able to have had that kind of relationship in an earlier period in your life--for example, back when you were in the Communist party?

Sennett: It all depends upon the person who is your wife. It depends upon her personality and her inclinations. I think that if I had been challenged more often by Gussie in our relationship, it could have been a lot healthier, although I must say that the period of time that we lived together I considered a very happy one and I think she did, too, for at least the better part of that relationship.

MW: But you don't consider yourself at that time so heavily indoctrinated with traditional notions of male chauvinism that had she challenged you, you would have walked out and said, "I'm not going to have my wife telling me what to do?"

Sennett: Quite the contrary. In the period during which Gussie and I were married, I always considered that I believed in women's rights and that I was conscious of it. I would wash the dishes and consider that I had done a chore that an ordinary nonsocial-caring husband would not deal with. I, however, didn't share in the bringing up of the children to the extent that Gussie did--work full time, take care of the house, do the cooking, the laundry, etc. And then participate in political work! Nevertheless I thought I was practicing equality with women. It was only much later on that I grasped more fundamentally the extent of the social oppression of women. My generation, even among the politically conscious

people, did not grasp the essence of that inequality. We called for equal rights and spoke against the practice of male chauvinism but it was only the younger generation of the 60s and 70s who zeroed in on the social nature of that discrimination.

MW: Do you feel that your ideological training and experience as a Communist equipped you psychologically to have a different kind of marriage, to have an equal modern marriage?

Sennett: I think it was very fundamental to me. The Communists were pioneers in women's rights, but didn't go far enough. I understand even in those countries that consider themselves socialist, in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, even though they talk about practicing equality, women still play in many instances a secondary role. They are not in decisive positions of leadership. There are few women in leading positions of the Communist party hierarchy. I believe, at this point, there are no women in the Soviet Union who are on the Political Bureau or the Secretariat. There are probably a few, but very few, on the central committee. There is no leading woman I can think of in the Soviet cabinet at this moment, and this after sixty-five years of a society that believes in the equality of women with men.

So there was an agreement in theory that women should and must be equal and that there must be a fight for equality, and there have been some improvements as a result, and I think the door was open. But it has not been implemented at this stage in our lives.

MW: You have been living with Rosalie now for a number of years. How many?

Sennett: We have been together--living together--for a little over seven years.

MW: You are not formally married, although, as you said a moment ago, you look upon it in effect as a marriage relationship. Does that mean that your views about marriage as a formal institution have changed or that you think that this kind of relationship you have outside of a formal legal marriage is the appropriate kind of relationship for the modern society we live in?

Sennett: I am not prepared to say that I think we have done what everybody else should do. When Gussie and I got married after I came back from Spain, we didn't get married because we were planning to have children. In fact, I came home at the end of 1938 and my daughter was born in 1941. So there wasn't a need to legitimize our children by getting legally married. In fact, at that time, even though I believed in a relationship that could be just as

meaningful as being married without having a license, I did feel that if we were to get married that it would give us a little more security in our relationship. It was also easier having papers legitimizing that relationship and conforming to the moral code of the times.

When I got married to Sandy, in retrospect, it was a mistake. We could just as well have gotten together and lived together without benefit of marriage. But I think both of us agreed that because she was being uprooted, there would be a greater feeling of security with a legal marriage.

MW: Now, you said about Gussie that it would give you a greater sense of [security].

Sennett: That's right. I don't recall exactly what my feelings were then, but I am pretty sure that I felt that being married would solidify a relationship. I had been away from home for about two years.

MW: But apparently that kind of solidification isn't necessary any longer, either for you or for Rosalie.

Sennett: No, I don't feel that it has any special value at this point. That is not to say that I would take a stand and say, "This is the way it has to be done or should be done," or try to advise anybody along that line. I think different people have different reasons for marriages and apparently the pendulum seems to be swinging a little back to the point where more young people are again getting married legally. This now seems to be happening to those who even are living together for a short while. Perhaps they, too, feel that they solidify their relationship once they get legally married.

MW: But in your relationship with Rosalie, the issue really just simply hasn't arisen?

Sennett: No, it hasn't, and neither Rosalie nor I see any reason for it.

MW: Now, your lifestyle still involves your traveling a good deal and you are away from home a good deal, is that correct?

Sennett: Not anywhere near what it was when I was working for Transport Pool.

MW: How about Rosalie's lifestyle? Is she away more than you are?

Sennett: Rosalie does a lot more traveling than I do because she likes to travel more. She visits a lot of places I am not as anxious to see. So when she wants to go and I'm not interested, she takes the

trip on her own or with other friends. While I haven't traveled alone as much as she has, the reverse is also true. We have that kind of understanding and that kind of relationship.

MW: Do you have in effect here a kind of a reversal where she is away from home all of the time and you are at home? [laughs]

Sennett: She is not away all of the time, but she is away from home more than I am.

MW: And that doesn't bother you?

Sennett: Oh, no, not at all. I found that as I grow older, even though Rosalie and I have a warm relationship together, that I enjoy being alone a lot more than I did in the past and she does, too. To an extent, that makes it possible for both of us to do that comfortably.

MW: So in effect you have established a relationship in which you can each have a large element of an independent life, as well as a very large shared life together; that is, you can do your thing--activities in which she is not involved--and she has things in which you are not involved, and then you do a number of things together.

Sennett: I think so, but since I've lived to the ripe old age of--I'll be sixty-eight next month--I've learned that there is not always a constant in life. I don't know what my attitudes or Rosalie's attitudes will be as time goes on. There is a process in aging which makes us perhaps a little different than we used to be at another time in our life and one cannot say that one has found the perfect solution for all time. Conditions and circumstances change in life and one never knows what the ultimate outcome will ever be.

MW: How old is Rosalie?

Sennett: Rosalie is fifty-six.

TRANSPORT POOL IS BOUGHT AND SOLD

MW: I think we have touched on your personal life more than a little. Let's go back to Transport Pool. Have we said everything that needs to be said about that?

Sennett: Oh, no, there is a lot more to say about Transport Pool because it played a big part in my life from 1966 until my retirement in 1976. The truck-trailer business was a career begun in 1960. We built a new company at a pace exceeding that of the Fruehauf Rentco operation. In less than three years, we surpassed Rentco in fleet size, in revenue, and in earnings. By the end of 1973, we owned approximately 20,000 truck trailers in the United States, Canada, and seven countries in Europe. We had built forty-four branches in the United States, eight in Canada, and eighteen in Europe.

In 1969, in Transport Pool, I initiated a new kind of service dealing with the renting and leasing of mobile and modular offices. I was able to find a small company that was cash short and wanted to sell mobile and modular structures with their leases. These involved buying what were some temporary school buildings. We bought the equipment and the contract and thereby launched a new business. We started to expand this operation to include mobile and modular offices, laboratories, workshops, temporary facilities of all sorts, even warehouses. By the end of 1973 we had approximately two and a half thousand units in eleven separate branches in the United States.

We were able to use some of the same facilities where we had Transport Pool truck trailer equipment for lease. Therefore, we were able to make some significant savings in overhead. As time went on we built other independent branch facilities as well.

In 1966, Strick started as an independent company with Transport Pool as a division of that company. But by the end of that year, we sold our company to the New York Central Railroad. The reason for that sale was that we didn't have the cash for expansion and, secondly, those of us who had become the equity owners were able to sell our privately held stock for cash and realize a quick return on our investment.

By 1968, however, the New York Central, which had been carrying on merger negotiations with the Pennsylvania Railroad for several years, merged with that company. Shortly thereafter the combined company was on the road to bankruptcy. We in Strick were now part of the Penn-Central Railroad. We had a joint Strick board of directors with the New York Central people which included Alfred Pearlman as president and Wayne Hoffman as vice president of the New York Central. I was also a member of that board.

However, while our company was doing fairly well, the Penn-Central was not. When we realized that Penn-Central was going broke and into bankruptcy, Sol Katz, who is a great entrepreneur, got Lehman Brothers and the Prudential Life Insurance Company

(with the help of some banks) to provide the loans we needed to buy our company back. Once again we were independent.

When we went independent, we decided to structure Transport Pool as a separate entity to prepare a public offering. Transport Pool would go public in 1969 while Strick, the manufacturing company, planned to do that at a later date.

MW: Transport Pool?

Sennett: Transport Pool and Strick. Transport Pool was able to go public because we were able to put together a balance sheet and a financial statement to comply with required over-the-counter market regulations. The Strick Corporation was not yet able to do that. Those of us in management were able to get shares in both the Strick Corporation and in Transport Pool. I then became the president and chief executive officer of Transport Pool, which was a public company.

We set up a board independent of Strick and we had hired a young man who is today the head of Transport International Pool, Michael Morris, who became the executive vice president. He was, prior to that, the controller of another truck-leasing company called Berman Lease. Among those who were members of our board of directors in addition to Mike Morris was a representative from Lehman Brothers, Sidney Kahn, and the president of the First Pennsylvania Bank, Jim Bodine.

LEASING TRUCK TRAILERS IN THE SOVIET UNION AND ISRAEL

Sennett: Our European operations were headquartered in Amsterdam and they were headed by a man we hired named Martin Adema. We developed not only a branch business, but we began to lease trailers out of our Amsterdam headquarters to the Soviet Union, to a Soviet company called Sovtransavto. That company was responsible for picking up freight in European countries and bringing it into the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union had another trucking company which was responsible for picking up and delivering freight within the country itself and Sovtransavto became one of our large customers in Europe.

They even copied the Transport Pool logo, to some extent, to put on our trailers as well as their trucks. I went to the Soviet Union with our manager, Martin Adema, in 1971 and we signed a five-year lease purchase agreement for five hundred truck trailers. The Soviet Union eventually leased some other equipment

from our European facilities, mainly chassis for use with cargo containers.

MW: When you went to the Soviet Union, were any of the people you contacted there apparently aware of your background and that you had been a former Communist?

Sennett: Unless the KGB investigated me, they were not aware, because I did not speak about my background. My feeling, from having talked to other left-wing business people, was that the Soviet Union did not like to do business with ex-Communists. Soviet ex-Communists are pariahs in the Soviet Union and foreign ex-Communists are not looked upon with favor either.

I got to know the president of Sovtransavto and met with the minister of transportation for the largest Soviet republic, and we never got involved in talking politics.

MW: You didn't ever have any inclination to go talk to people whose names you had been familiar with from the past?

Sennett: No. That would not have been to the best interests of our business dealings.

MW: There were no old comrades that you wanted to look up or anything of that nature?

Sennett: No. I didn't know any old comrades in the Soviet Union.

MW: Was that the first time that you had been to the Soviet Union?

Sennett: No, I had been to the Soviet Union on a visit in 1965 with my family.

MW: I don't think we talked about that, did we?

Sennett: I believe we did. I had an interesting experience in a discussion with the Soviet trucking company. On a second trip to Sovtransavto, I believe it was in 1972, I learned that the Soviet Union was building a large truck-building plant in Kama, Siberia. I was interested since a large number of those trucks were truck tractors for over-the-road use to haul trailer loads. I was interested in knowing whether, in addition to the trailers they leased from us, they were going to need more trailers or would they build the trailers in their own factories.

The people who headed Sovtransavto were unaware of any large-scale trailer-producing facilities [planned in the Soviet Union]. The trailers they were producing were not modern trailers in the

sense that they were too heavy in weight and limited in cubic capacity as well. The Twenty-fourth Congress of the Communist party had taken place and I had picked up a couple of pamphlets on that Congress in the Marxist bookstore in San Francisco.

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MW: On the previous tape, you were just talking about your trip to the Soviet Union and the fact that the Twenty-fourth Party Congress was taking place there and you had picked up a copy of the speech of Leonid Brezhnev in San Francisco before you had gone to Moscow.

Sennett: When I asked the president of Sovtransavto about the greater use of truck trailers in the Soviet Union and what their plans were, I pointed out to him that in the United States, the use of truck trailers was a more efficient way of delivering freight. One truck tractor and one man could work with two and possibly three trailers without being tied to a fixed straight truck. The ratio in the United States, in the seventies, had developed to the point where there were approximately three and a half trailers in use to one man and one truck tractor. I didn't know what the Soviet Union's ratio was, but obviously it was very low, and an improved operating ratio would enhance transportation productivity.

I asked him what the new five-year plan had projected in the way of enlarging truck trailer usage. The president said that there was no goal or target set for numbers of trailers as such. I asked him about the trucks that were to be built in the Kama plant. It had been announced that when the plant was in operation it would build 75,000 heavy-duty trucks of which about 50 percent would be for over-the-road use. I asked if a large number were to be built for truck-trailer service. The president said he didn't know.

I said that I had brought with me the printed reports, translated in English, of the prime minister, Alexi Kosygin, and of the secretary of the Communist party, Brezhnev. Kosygin's report, dealing with the current five-year plan, mentioned the large heavy-duty truck building program and the expansion of truck traffic that would ensue. The plan called for hard surfacing 98,000 kilometers of roads leading out of Siberia into European Russian cities.

The president asked me where I had gotten the English translated pamphlets. He was surprised when I told him that I bought them in a San Francisco bookstore. I didn't mention that it was a Communist bookshop. The pamphlets had been printed in Moscow and distributed for sale in English-speaking countries.

I was somewhat surprised myself that the head of one of the Soviet Union's major transportation companies seemed unfamiliar with the planned objectives for growth in his field of operation.

MW: When you applied for a visa, I assume that the Soviet Union checks out people who go to the Soviet Union fairly well--at least, for instance, through their computers--and I would find it very surprising that they didn't know who you were or have some kind of a dossier on you when they let you in to engage in these negotiations. Would you agree with that?

Sennett: I am not sure that everybody gets checked out. It might well be that as a result of greater travel to the Soviet Union that not every single person is checked before visas are granted. After all, our own FBI makes a lot of mistakes and avoids checking on some people in the process. But I don't believe that they checked on me or if they did, they didn't feel that it was serious enough to keep me from going there on business so long as I stuck to business.

MW: It certainly is a great irony in that you are going back to the Soviet Union and soft-peddling your Communist background which you also had to soft-peddle in effect in the American capitalist community.

Sennett: [laughs] That's true, that is ironic!

I also made a trip to Israel on business. I have been there several times. One was for a conference held by the veterans of the International Brigades in Israel. My first trip was a visit to the Strick Corporations's jointly owned container plant which was developed by the metal factory sponsored by the Netzer-Sereni Kibbutz.

MW: Was this a relationship that was purely business?

Sennett: That trip was purely business when I went there.

MW: But the relationship with the kibbutz?

Sennett: The kibbutz owned the metal factory. As part of their income, in addition to having farm products, they ran a factory. A number of kibbutzes do that. With Strick's help in a partnership, they started producing freight containers for sale. They were interested also in producing truck trailers and Sol Katz suggested to me that Transport Pool might be able to get trailers built for European operations at a better price. I gave them engineering drawings and asked them to bid when they were ready. Nothing very

much came of it because we were able to get better prices from other European companies.

I was in Israel on another occasion--this time political. Two of my Spanish Civil War friends from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Milton Wolff, who had been the last commander of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion in Spain, and Saul Wellman, who had been the district organizer of the Communist party of Michigan and had been indicted under the Smith Act--

MW: Were they both Jews?

Sennett: We were all three of us Jews, yes. We had been invited by Israeli veterans, most of them who had migrated from other countries. There apparently were about forty Spanish vets in Israel. They called on the veterans in all countries to protest the action by the Polish government in the sixties and seventies taken against the Jews who wanted to emigrate and go to Israel. These people had government pensions taken away from them when they left the country. Milt, Saul, and I thought it was incomprehensible and punitive. Imagine being deprived of Social Security because of political reasons. And it was because of anti-Semitism that these vets left their country.

I remember at one time when William Z. Foster applied for Social Security in the 50s and the government tried to deny him that right. We were able to raise a storm and kick up a rumpus to prevent that from happening.

Five American vets attended that conference in Israel in 1972. There were some eighty veterans in attendance in Tel Aviv and we agreed to bring pressure to bear on the Polish government to reverse their position. An American delegation protested to the Polish embassy and like actions were taken by vets in other countries. However, to this day these pensions have not been reinstated.

VIEWS ON ISRAEL

MW: What was your feeling about Israel?

Sennett: I felt kind of warm. I didn't think I would [feel that way] when I visited there. I guess there is something to going back to what is essentially your roots. I was glad to be there. I enjoyed my visit particularly in 1972. We stayed on a kibbutz near the Golan Heights called Kfar-Blum. [spells name] Most of these kibbutzim

are named after prominent Jews who had helped Israel. Blum was Leon Blum, a former prime minister of France. I felt at ease on the kibbutz. It reminded me of the days when I was in the old Communist left camp called Camp Unity with a common mess hall, laundry, and recreation area. Of course, in addition to games, there was friendly communal living. The members of the kibbutz were farming and worked in their own furniture factory to add to Kfar-Blum's income.

I liked their idealism, their spirit of cooperation, and their lifestyle. It was like grass-roots communism. I didn't agree with the policies of the Israeli government in denying the Palestinians their right to an independent state but I found the people very open, in the main, very democratic, very easy to talk to, and I didn't have to hide my views. It was not like my trips to the Soviet Union; you have to be careful about what you say there and to whom. I could say anything in Israel. I could call the prime minister a bum and I could tell people there, even though I was an American, that I disagreed with their policies. I didn't feel that there were any secret police following me or their own people.

MW: During the period of Israel's creation back in 1948, you were still in the Communist party. Do you recall Israel and the issue of Israel and its wars with the Arab states and so forth having been an important part of the political dialogue in which you were engaged? Had you, over a long period of time, formed a political attitude toward the state of Israel?

Sennett: Yes, I had. My view then was the viewpoint taken by the Communist party.

MW: Which was supportive of the creation of the state?

Sennett: The Soviet Union was the first country to recognize Israel. There was a race between the United States and the Soviet Union to cast the first vote in favor of an independent Israeli state.

MW: So there never was any real contradiction between your Communist views and the development of the Israeli state.

Sennett: As time went on, I felt that Israel had betrayed the Palestinians by keeping them from setting up an independent Palestinian state. Such a state was implicit to me as part of the recognition of Israel. On the other hand, I also felt that perhaps it was even a mistake for the state of Israel to have been created since there was now a serious matter of provocation and turmoil in the Middle East. I didn't believe in Israel's destruction but these were my contradictory moods over a period of time.

On the one hand I was proud of the fact that the Israeli Jews, through skill, dedication, and resourcefulness, were able to "make the desert bloom." They were also able to create the most effective fighting forces in the Middle East despite their relatively small numbers as compared with the Arab nations. True they had the financial help of world Jewry and the overwhelming financial, military, and political backing of the United States. But it was Israeli bodies who were doing the working and fighting.

On the other hand, as time has gone on, I feel that it is Israel that is now the aggressor and it is Israel that is primarily responsible for denying a homeland to millions of Palestinians.

MW: You have never classified yourself as a Zionist, I gather.

Sennett: Never; I am a nonreligious Jew and an internationalist. And there are many Israeli Jews who are of the same mind. However, they are a minority in their country. I consider Zionism as part of a religious-nationalist political philosophy and I think such views are largely responsible for the difficulties in bringing about an accomodation in the Middle East.

MW: Did you finish your story about you three Abraham Lincoln Brigadists in Israel?

Sennett: Essentially, yes. We were there, we were sympathetic, we protested against the heinous actions by the Polish government against their former citizens who were denied their pensions. It hasn't been settled to this date, and the veterans of the Lincoln Brigade, despite a division of opinion, in their dwindling ranks in the United States, are still on record in opposition. Some vets, members of the Communist party, want to drop the matter.

GELCO CORPORATION BUYS TRANSPORT POOL

MW: What other travel did you do during this period?

Sennett: My further travels were mostly on routine business matters. The Gelco Corporation bought our company in 1974. This was just about the time that a recession had set in, affecting the transportation industry severely. Sol Katz, the largest shareholder of Transport Pool stock, was interested and amenable to the sale because Gelco offered cash. Katz and his family owned about 420,000 shares of stock. I owned 50,000 shares of stock and welcomed the oppor-

OK! That Room

VOLUME 1 — NUMBER 3

[Gelco Corporation newspaper, July 1976]

with Gelco

Michael Morris Named to Head Transport Pool

Founder William Sennett
Hails Morris as 'Natural'
To Assume TP Presidency

Concurrent with the appointment of Michael Morris as the new chief of Transport Pool Corporation, William Sennett, founder of the company, announced his retirement as president and chief executive officer and his intention to leave active management September 1.



In a memo to TP officers and staff, he called Morris' appointment "a decision with which I wholeheartedly concur." Stating that he would be working with the new president "for the next two months to effectuate this transition," he continued:

Entrusted with Guidance
Of No. 1 Over-the-Road
Trailer Rental Company

Michael J. Morris has been selected as the new president and chief executive officer of the Transport Pool Division of Gelco Corporation, effective July 1.



The announcement was made by N. Bud Grossman, chairman and chief executive officer of Gelco; who said, "Mike is our unanimous choice to carry on the great tradition of Transport Pool and guide its future expansion."

Morris, former executive vice president of Transport Pool, succeeds the retiring William Sennett, who founded what has



Open house guests mingled with Gelco employees June 8 to celebrate the company's 20th anniversary and mark the official public opening of the new International Headquarters Building in Eden Prairie, a suburb of Minneapolis. More than 800 area business and civic leaders attended the reception and toured the new building. Gelco also held an April 26 luncheon and tour for representatives of the automobile manufacturing companies and their finance subsidiaries, who were in Minneapolis for the National Association of Fleet Administrators (NAFA) convention. Also on April 26, Gelco's clients in town for the convention were guests at an evening reception which included tours of the new building.

tunity to make a change in my life's pursuits. I was somewhat weary of the incessant travel and felt that I could retire rather comfortably shortly after the merger. I had a long-term nine-year employment contract and I could collect two-thirds of my salary for the remaining period on retirement.

Mike Morris, who is president of Transport Pool (now called Transport International Pool and owned by Gelco), did not want to sell. He knew he was going to be the president and he felt that he would have a wider range of authority by being independent as a public company and was opposed to becoming a division head of another company. Katz and I and other key stockholders could overrule Morris and he was persuaded, reluctantly, to go along.

With the consummation of the merger, Mike Morris and I were added to the board of directors of Gelco and were made executive vice presidents of the parent company. I decided to retire on my sixty-second birthday and did so as of September 1, 1976. My contract expiration date was October 1, 1982. I agreed to remain as a consultant on call for any projects that the company would have me undertake. I undertook several projects for the company during the period that I was a consultant. One of them was to help build another division called Gelco Rail Services. We bought refrigerated trailers for use on piggyback rail cars hauling fruits and vegetables from California to the Midwest and the East.

MW: I presume that the time that you retired was probably the time of your largest personal holdings, and your personal wealth was probably greatest at that particular moment. Had you reached the stage in your earnings and acquisitions where one could fairly say that you were in the millionaire class?

Sennett: I would say on the low end of that class. While I am living comfortably, I have contributed a fair-sized portion of my assets in setting up a living trust for the needs of my beneficiaries.

CURRENT VIEWS ON COMMUNISM AND DEMOCRACY

MW: Let me ask you one more question. Are you aware of any other Communist or ex-Communist who has done so well, economically, in the same period?

Sennett: Oh, yes. I'm aware of several. I'm sure there are some who have acquired much more wealth than I have. I remember a cynical question asked in my youth like "would you still be a Communist if you were a millionaire?" For myself, and for some of the others

that I know, the answer would be yes. The difference in my case has nothing to do with acquiring personal wealth. I am no longer a Communist with a capital C. But I am, in essence, a communist with a small "c," believing in the concept and the ideology of communism, but not a part of the Communist party or a partisan of the Communist countries.

MW: Your use of tense confuses me just a little bit. Would you say then that, in effect, you're still a communist, with a small "c"?

Sennett: I think so. I don't call myself a Communist these days. I am a Socialist. I'm a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, which is a grouping resulting from an amalgamation of the New American Movement and the old Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee. I believe that socialism is a stage in the development of a higher stage of communism. From that point of view I therefore consider that I believe in the need for a truly democratic communism.

MW: So you don't perceive that your basic political views have really changed very much?

Sennett: If you use the word "basic," and we generalize about socialism and communism, no, they have not changed very much. But there have been a lot of changes in my views about what a socialist society is or should be. There are a lot of changes in my views about theories, postulates, and practices of the founders of socialism--of Marx and Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Tse Tung. And there are a lot of changes in my views about how socialist societies should function. The main element, in my thinking, with respect to any society must be democracy, which those of us who were active in the Communist party dismissed too easily, as simply a natural outgrowth of what are called socialist societies these days.

MW: So, the main change in your views seems to be with regard to organizational structures and bureaucracies. I mean, you were willing to put up with democratic centralism and an undemocratic structure in the 30s and 40s. But you're no longer willing to do that.

Sennett: That's true. I think I did not understand democracy, at least as much as I do today. I called things "democratic" which were not truly democratic. I thought of democracy in different terms than I do today. I look upon democracy more fundamentally when I think in terms of democratic base and structure. Democracy in practice is more difficult to achieve than a democratic concept whether in capitalist or Communist countries.

Sennett: A genuinely democratic structure would have to be basically controlled by people in the workplace, neighborhoods, on farms, institutions, and in government at all levels. There must be centralized planning and coordination subject to final decision by the base--the source of all control.

IN THESE TIMES

Sennett: The experiences in my lifetime have proven to me that genuine democracy must be the core in the decision-making process even though it may be difficult to achieve and more cumbersome in practice.

After I retired from Gelco, I decided to pull an oar to encourage the development of democratic socialism. Jim Weinstein, a historian, had founded a weekly independent socialist weekly newspaper called In These Times and he asked me to help. It was undercapitalized and had inexperienced people on its business and circulation staff. I took on the responsibility of being co-publisher with Jim who was the paper's editor.

MW: Did Weinstein have any experience as a writer and editor?

Sennett: He had written several books that were published and had been the editor of a magazine called Socialist Revolution, now known as Socialist Review. His concept, with the publication of In These Times, was to help legitimize a socialist public presence in the United States. It was his view that there were several million people in the United States who were left of center in their thinking and were therefore that part of the "universe" in marketing for readers.

Weinstein was anxious to broaden the appeal of a radical publication by changing from stirring declamations and calls to action to down-to-earth writing to make the publication more readable and interesting. It was independent so that it could even be critical of supportive socialists, based on objective facts and evidence. The publication also intended to encourage public debate and to stimulate the thinking of its readers on local, national, and international issues.

I thought In These Times made sense even though the business prospectus was flawed in its optimistic projections. Though there was no way I could see the paper breaking even for a long time, this was not an ordinary business venture. I felt that the readers would contribute to making up the deficit. And that

proved to be the case even though the deficit rose to over \$420,000 in 1982. I worked with the paper for five years as its co-publisher and resigned because of other political and social involvements on the West Coast. My belief in the need for In These Times is undiminished.

MW: This paper, In These Times, has the initials--

##

MW: I was commenting on the initials, ITT. Why were they chosen?

Sennett: Jim Weinstein in starting the paper told me that they had selected other names as their first choice and each had been preempted because other, similar names were registered. One of those names was These Times. Since that was also taken, with the word "In" added, they had their name. It had no relationship to the International Telephone and Telegraph Company, though we were often teased about the ITT designation.

MW: The way you described your role in the paper was, it seems to me, excessively modest. You were the chief fund raiser, is that not correct?

Sennett: No, I was not the chief fund raiser. The chief fund raiser was Jimmy Weinstein himself. Jimmy comes from wealthy parents and he has worked on the paper without any compensation at all. In addition to that, he has put up his own money and has raised money from parents, friends, associates, and readers of In These Times. I worked with Jimmy to help raise the money, but we also made a direct appeal to our readers and we had a fund raiser who worked on the staff of the paper, in Chicago. In the 1982 fund campaign, for example, almost 3,000 readers out of 25,000 contributed to keep te paper alive.

I participated by taking responsibility for the business side of the staff, primarily. I would work with the business manager, the associate publisher, the circulation department, all aspects of business, funding, and support. And I sat in on the planning by the editorial staff only when I was in Chicago. It's difficult to do that from afar, or by frequent telephone calls.

Jimmy and I would get together. I was in Chicago at least three times a year and he would be out on the West Coast for consultation and planning several times a year. So we had an opportunity to discuss the policies of the paper overall, editorially as well as financially.

- MW: So you would describe the decision-making power on the paper as somewhat equally divided between you and Jimmy?
- Sennett: No, that was impractical. Jimmy had to make most of the decisions on the spot in Chicago. It was very difficult operating from California with a paper that was printed out of Chicago and the whole staff based there.
- MW: Now, he comes from a different background, tradition, and generation than yourself. He came out of the Students for a Democratic Society. Did you ever find yourself in disagreement with any of the policies of the paper?
- Sennett: There were some disagreements, but there were not many. Essentially, by the time I got to work with the paper I found myself in basic agreement with Weinstein politically. My main disagreements were based on some of his staff selections, and his loose habits in administration.
- MW: Okay. I think we've covered just about everything except the Business Executives' Movement for Peace in Vietnam and your trip to Italy, where you had some contact with the Italian left.
- Sennett: Max Gordon, an old friend and political journalist, and I wrote an article on "Italy's Communist Paradox," which appeared in the May 1977 issue of The Progressive magazine. It was also distributed by Pacific News Service to a number of other publications. That article is included in the appendix to this oral history. It pretty much sums up my observations of the Italian political scene at that time.

SUMMING UP

- MW: Maybe this is the time for summing up, unless you want to amplify any of our previous discussions.
- I'd like to ask you now, looking back on this interesting history, is there anything you would do differently if you had it to do over again?
- Sennett: Oh, certainly! There are a lot of things that I would do differently. But we're not given that chance in life, so I don't find it useful even to speculate about what I would do that's different. I've tried to recall and to indicate some of the errors that I made in my relationships with the Communist movement, and in my personal life. I feel that, if all of us were

given an opportunity to go through life and then to do it over again, we would do a number of things differently.

Essentially, I consider that I have had an interesting, eventful, and gratifying life due to my association with meaningful political and social causes. Whatever I may have given in the way of activity and time to those ongoing movements in which I have participated, I have been amply repaid in the enrichment of my own life. If I were to go through life again I would not change much in that search for meaning and happiness.

MW: No great regrets?

Sennett: Not too many.

MW: Do you still believe that the workers of the world should unite, that they have nothing to lose but their chains?

Sennett: Absolutely, and they have a world to gain.

MW: That's a good note on which to end.

Transcriber: Michelle Stafford

Final Typists: Michelle Stafford and Sam Middlebrooks

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APPENDIX A -- Materials Donated to The Bancroft Library

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APPENDIX B

**A classic dilemma:
immediate reform or pursuit of the socialist goal**

Italy's Communist Paradox

BILL SENNETT and MAX GORDON

The paradox is striking: the West's strongest Communist Party is providing indispensable support for a weak, minority government attempting to revitalize a capitalist economy by forcing sacrifices on the population, including the better-paid workers and consumers. The setting is Italy, where the ruling Christian Democrats (DC) must sit down to bargain with leaders of the Communist Party (PCI), without whose acquiescence they lack the majority required to pass legislation.

The PCI provides a dramatic illustration of the classic dilemma which has confronted revolutionary Marxist parties in capitalist countries since *The Communist Manifesto* was published in 1848: What priorities should be assigned among those measures required to meet the immediate needs of the people and those that advance the goal of a socialist society?

The dilemma is particularly acute in Italy for two reasons: The nation is gripped by a profound economic crisis, and the Communist Party wields significant political power. The crisis carries the threat not only of economic chaos, but also of imminent danger to the nation's democratic political structure.

With the experience of Salvador Allende's Chilean experiment fresh in mind, Italy's Communist leaders are moving with extreme caution. They fear that drastic action by the Left could prompt a coup by still powerful fascist elements who might act through Italy's armed forces — with the support of the United States. At best, the result might be a civil war — with the outcome far from certain.

In response to the immediate crisis, the PCI has called for creation of an emergency coalition government involving all parties except the neo-fascists. Christian Dem-

ocrats have rejected this scheme so far, preferring to govern alone as a minority rather than allow Communist participation in the government.

The DC cannot form a coalition with the Socialist Party, which holds some 10 per cent of parliamentary seats, since the Socialists will not participate in a new government without the Communists. The combined Left of Communists, Socialists, and others constitutes about 47 per cent of the Italian parliament, but the Communists have made it clear that even if they were to attain a close majority, they would reject formation of a socialist coalition government. They argue that only the political and moral authority conveyed by an overwhelming popular majority can compel acceptance of the drastic measures required to resolve the crisis, restructure the economy, and avoid the fate of Chile.

Italy's crisis involves not only the nation's economy, but also its political and social structure. Industry operates at about 60 per cent of capacity, unemployment exceeds 1.1 million, and millions more work part-time or are subsidized on non-productive jobs. Some three million Italian emigrants still work outside their country. With a population of fifty-five million, Italy is unable to produce all the food it needs; much of it is imported, while millions of peasants live at poverty levels.

Double-digit inflation has ravaged the nation for years, and currently runs to about 20 per cent. The Italian lira has lost almost one-third of its value in the past year alone, and the negative balance of trade grows catastrophically as imports continue to outstrip exports.

While all the major parties and the trade unions agree that the crisis requires severe austerity measures, the nature and extent of those measures are matters of contention. The PCI and the unions have, so far, blocked most of the traditional policies that would place the burden of the crisis on the backs of workers and middle-income people — increased unemployment, wage cuts, and reductions in social services.

While conceding that certain sacrifices are required, the

Bill Sennett, a transportation consultant in San Francisco, and Max Gordon, a political journalist in New York City, recently spent two months in Italy, where they attended a reunion of Spanish Civil War veterans and interviewed Italian Communist leaders.

PCI and the unions insist that these must be borne primarily by those with the greatest wealth and the highest incomes. The Communists charge that succeeding Christian Democratic governments have squandered billions of dollars through corruption and waste, that useless bureaucratic agencies have proliferated, and that the nation has been led into a quagmire by lack of planning.

Last fall, the government introduced a series of austerity measures designed to raise \$5 billion and reduce the year's huge \$20 billion budget deficit. It also proposed to eliminate wage indexation, which provides for automatic pay increases to match the rate of inflation, but was compelled to maintain indexation for lower-paid workers. Decrees which were put into effect pending parliamentary approval included increases in utility rates and railroad and gasoline prices, and an automobile tax based on horsepower which would exempt the small Fiat most popular with low-income Italians.

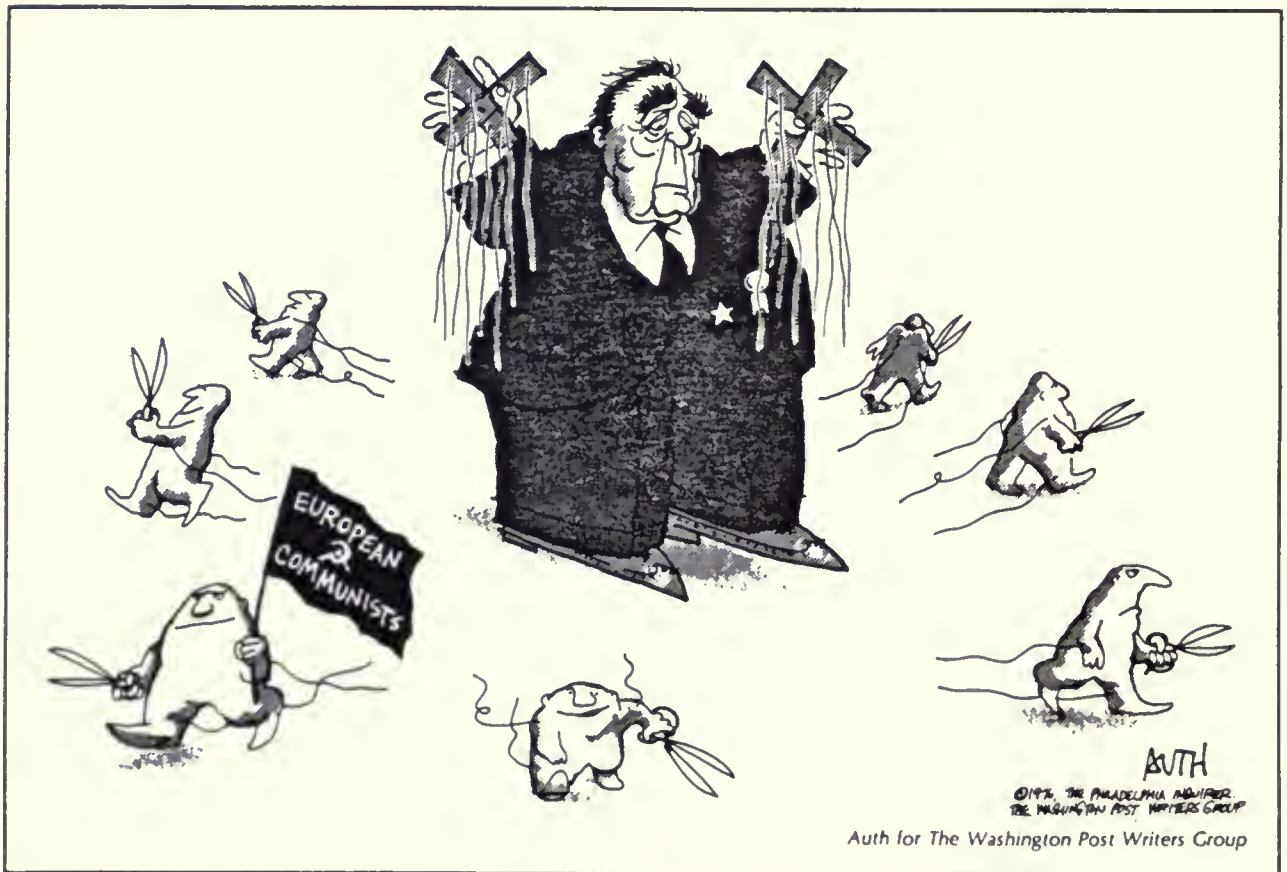
Still to be considered were the demands of the Left parties for measures to eliminate the massive tax evasion widely practiced by business and professional people while taxes are strictly collected from workers' pay. The PCI is pressing a four-point program of recovery and renewal calling for substantial investments in housing, health, educational facilities, and public transportation.

The PCI, with 1.8 million members and thirteen

million Italian voters behind it, has won wide support for its programs and activities. Nevertheless, questions have been raised inside and outside Communist ranks by the Party's acquiescence in Christian Democratic minority rule and by its proposals for a "historic compromise" with the nation's major capitalist party.

To explain its position, the Communist Party held some 3,000 local meetings around the country last fall, soon after the government announced its new tax program. Heated controversy over the Party's policies surfaced at many of these meetings, and a sharp debate ensued at the PCI's Central Committee meeting in mid-October, much of it openly reported in the Party press. Luigi Longo, president of the Party, took issue with the Party's emphasis on resolution of the immediate crisis at the apparent expense of future considerations. He voiced fears that the Communists would lose power and influence, particularly among workers and unionists. "It's just not enough to say, 'Let's get out of the crisis, and then we'll see about reforms,'" said Longo. "The workers want to be sure that after the crisis has passed, they won't have to confront the same political and economic forces ready to do battle against them again."

Communist Party leaders, however, are aware of the tough decisions needed to overcome current economic problems. They contend that a combination of short-term



'Leaders reject the possibility of legislating a socialist revolution with a 51 per cent majority....'

and long-term programs that improve the balance of trade and the balance of payments, cut the rate of inflation, increase the level of productivity, rehabilitate the nation's agriculture, and provide new funds for industrial development will put the nation on firmer ground so it will be able to provide even greater benefits to workers in the future. The crisis is so profound, they argue, that the country will collapse in chaos unless resolved by a comprehensive, coherent program such as the one they have projected. The PCI believes that its proposed all-party emergency government would be the best vehicle to implement the program. But, short of that, the Communists will seek to compel the Christian Democrats to accept the program's basic elements.

Beyond the immediate emergency measures, the Communists insist that the economy requires profound restructuring to meet the needs of modern Italian society. Policies that will promote a better balance between industry and agriculture, lift the poverty-stricken South to the economic and social level of the North, place the public sector of the economy under responsible control and limit the number of other industries receiving state assistance, and encourage the development of a system of efficient, competitive small- and medium-sized industries are incompatible, in the long run, with big business and its allies in the Christian Democratic Party, the PCI believes.

As these measures are pressed, leaders calculate, Christian Democrats favoring them will break with those who oppose them. The result will be a coalition not only of Communists and Socialists, but of the mass of Catholic workers, farmers, and lower middle classes now tied to the Christian Democrats. The key assumption is that socialism will be built not when one "vanguard" party reaches power, but only when a coalition commanding the support of a large majority of the population sees the necessity of a socialist transformation. Leaders reject the possibility of legislating a socialist revolution with a 51 per cent majority; they project a gradual, democratic, and widely supported transition, not a sudden revolution.

This assumption has been a crucial point of debate on the Italian and European Left. Critics argue that reform and revitalization of the capitalist economy will do precisely what it did after World War II — strengthen the capitalist parties. And they add that the introduction of socialism piece by piece — rather than in one massive dose — will only discredit the Left by spurring economic collapse as capitalists shut down their plants and take their money out of the country.

The PCI's commitment to a democratic transition to

multi-party socialism — sharply different from any Communist-led government today — is consistent with its historical development. Because of their leadership in the partisan struggles against Mussolini and his Nazi allies, which they conducted in alliance with non-Communists, the Italian Communists emerged from World War II as the strongest political force in the country, though they commanded the support of only about one-fifth of the population. Collaborating with the Christian Democrats and the Socialist Party in a coalition government until the beginning of the Cold War, they played a prominent role in writing the Italian constitution and began to develop a concept of Italian socialism distinct from the Soviet model.

In the past twenty years, Italian Communists have successfully tackled local as well as national problems, earning them a large measure of respect, even among non-Communists, and resulting in a steady increase in political strength. Communist or leftist administrations govern forty-one out of ninety-two Italian provinces and seven out of twenty regions. Most major cities — including Rome, Milan, Turin, Bologna, and Naples — have Communist mayors, as do almost 1,000 smaller cities. More than one-third of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate are held by Party members.

Sergio Segre, head of the international department of the Italian Communist Party and a member of parliament, recently urged the United States to recognize that it is in its best interests to support an economically stable Italy and the stability will come only with a new relationship with the Communist Party. He declared that the PCI has modified its past hostility to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and now opposes Italy's withdrawal. The Communists realize, he explained, that withdrawal would upset the equilibrium between the Soviet and Western blocs that is a condition of Soviet-American détente. Other PCI leaders, however, have said that the Party opposes bloc diplomacy and have argued that Italy's goal in remaining in NATO should be to dissolve both the U.S. and Soviet blocs.

Whether the PCI's vision can ever be realized is an open question — both among Italians who doubt the PCI's sincerity and among those Communists in Italy and elsewhere who have not shaken off their Stalinist heritage. But for now, in the wake of the Party's massive grassroots discussions, unity appears to be firm. If that unity is sustained, the industrial West may soon be watching the most important experiment ever in fusing communism with Western democracy. □

APPENDIX C

Political Affairs
July 1955

The Chicago Elections and 1956

By William Sennett

SOME OF THE CITY and state political battles this year revealed important national trends affecting the issues, tactics and alignments in the momentous elections of 1956. Such trends were evident in the Chicago municipal primary and general election campaigns during the spring months. The features of those campaigns provide many important experiences shown by the following results:

The main people's coalition forces gained in strength, resisting some of the most divisive factors which were ever brought into play in a Chicago election—although some of the liberal and middle-class elements were diverted from the main issues.

The labor movement took a big step forward toward a fuller independent role while still failing to change its traditional relationship to the Democratic Party of tailing after and giving uncritical support.

The Negro people were moved into action around a number of deep-going issues and emerged as a more powerful, united electoral force. The growing political strength of the Negro people provided the margin of victory for the labor-backed ticket and led to new gains in increased Negro representation.

The people's forces were able to win a victory in spite of the political liabilities which the Democratic Party brought with it and despite the attempt of the Republican Party

to present itself as the vehicle for "liberal" local policies and good government.

* * *

The five-month Chicago primary and general election campaign opened on the heels of last November's congressional elections. In those contests, Chicago voters defeated a number of McCarthyites and showed a marked dissatisfaction with the Eisenhower regime.

As the Chicago elections unfolded, the Formosa crisis developed, alarming the country and heightening the resentment against the reckless pro-war maneuvers of the Republican administration.

This was also the period of the Eisenhower betrayal on tax cutting, when the G.O.P. revealed so very clearly its allegiance to Big Business and its hostility to the people in the low-income brackets.

These events could hardly fail to have a bearing on the Chicago campaign. However, the Republicans attempted to emphasize local issues and to shut out national issues. They waged an aggressive and shrewd campaign which aimed at neutralizing the traditional Democratic tendencies of a large section of Chicago voters.

The Republican Party developed a "new strategy" based on dividing the people's forces through the use of "liberal" demagoguery. The Illinois G.O.P. noted carefully the successful

use of peace demagoguery in Eisenhower's 1952 campaign, and also the defeats suffered by the G.O.P. Old Guard in 1954. The so-called Eisenhower Republicans in the state laid out a campaign plan for capturing Chicago by means of new faces, new slogans and by using popular catchphrases to becloud the real issues. This strategy was imposed on the Old Guard Republicans, long dominant in Illinois, who have in the past shunned mass appeals and who openly proclaimed their reactionary program.

The Republicans, headed by Gov. William G. Stratton, went into the Chicago campaign with this plan of action:

- 1) To select a new type of candidate who could best present a demagogic line and blur the more fundamental issues.
- 2) To conduct a campaign which would drive a wedge into the ranks of the growing people's coalition, winning independent voters from among the middle class and to some extent from among labor and the Negro people.
- 3) To capitalize on the local crime-corruption issue and center the main attack on the entrenched Democratic machine.
- 4) To take full advantage of the dissatisfaction of the people with the local housing and school crisis, with inadequate transportation and poor city services, with the failure of the previous administration to curb the

repeated outbreaks of racist mob violence.

Robert E. Merriam, young Democratic alderman, was the new type of candidate chosen by the Republican Party. A protégé of U.S. Senator Paul Douglas, he was often at odds with the Democratic machine on local budgetary matters. Merriam broke with the Democratic Party last fall when the Party showed little interest in his strong ambition to become a mayoralty candidate this year at all costs.

Merriam was a member of the Independent Voters of Illinois, which is the state affiliate of Americans for Democratic Action. He had considerable support among good-government and civic groups but no significant backing in the labor movement and among the Negro people. Long planning to run for mayor in the city, he concentrated on getting widespread publicity as a fighter against crime and corruption.

He presented himself as Chicago's Fiorello LaGuardia and claimed he would do for the Windy City what the latter did as the New-Deal mayor of New York.

The "fusion" movement never quite came off because the main sections of the people's movement recognized the meaning of his alliance with the most reactionary forces of the Republican Party, backed by the dominant sectors of industry, the big banks and the large real-estate interests.

But the Republican strategy did

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succeeded in swinging considerable support from among independent voters in middle-class communities.

As a result, the G.O.P. came closer to winning a city election than at any time since 1943. The 127,000 vote margin of victory by the Democratic candidate, Richard J. Daley, over Merriam (out of 1,300,000 votes cast) contrasts with Democratic majorities of over 390,000 in the city last November.

* * *

What was it that "saved" the Democratic Party from its first defeat in 24 years and prevented the city of Chicago from moving into the Republican column on the eve of the 1956 elections?

The decisive factor was the people's coalition forces, and particularly labor and the Negro people. Their unity on the main issues stood the test of the most confusion-ridden campaign in local election history. They saw the hand of reaction behind the Republican smoke-screen and recognized that the preferred party of Big Business would not provide a city administration responsive to the people's needs.

These coalition forces also saw the relationship between national policies and local issues and realized that the election outcome would have a bearing on 1956.

The *Chicago Sun-Times*, in a post-election lament over Merriam's defeat, noted that the Chicago voters expressed a "wish to keep political control of Chicago in the hands of

the Democrats to strengthen the Democratic Party nationally."

Undoubtedly, this was a key factor. This was a consideration with many voters who could not see any crucial differences between the Republican and Democratic programs on local issues.

The Democratic votes were cast by those who saw the Democratic Party as a better means for wresting concessions both locally and nationally. It was largely because of this approach that labor and the Negro people as a bloc rallied around the Democratic ticket, drawing with them other elements of the population.

Thus, the main considerations of

the people's coalition forces were the same ones which led to the defeat of Republican McCarthyite congressmen last November. These considerations are still the main guide for the people's forces for 1956.

* * *

Labor's intervention in Democratic Party councils to demand a nominee for mayor other than the incumbent, Martin H. Kennelly, was unprecedented. Up until that moment, the Democratic organization was prepared to slate Kennelly for reelection, regardless of the rumblings of discontent among the people over his eight-year rule.

The organization choice in the primary race was officially decided by a slatemaking committee set up by the Democratic Party in the city. Labor went before the Democratic

slatemakers and demanded that Kennelly be dropped. In doing so they outlined a general program of local issues emphasizing that these issues should be a guide for the Democratic Party in choosing its candidate.

Delegations from C.I.O., A.F.L. and independent unions appeared before the Democratic Party nominating committee. Along with trade union delegations, Negro and liberal groups also sent representatives to show how Kennelly had failed the people and to insist that he not be re-elected.

This kind of intervention was a big step forward for labor. It was a departure from the previous practice of waiting for the Democratic machine to name the ticket and then adding a rubber-stamp endorsement. And, due to this kind of pressure, the Democrats felt compelled to drop Kennelly as the official candidate. However, at this point, labor and its allies failed to make affirmative demands on the composition of the city ticket.

The result was the selection of County Democratic chairman, Richard J. Daley, as the organization candidate for mayor. The ticket had no labor or Negro representation for the top three city posts, nor was there a single trade unionist slated by the Democratic Party in any of the 50 aldermanic contests.

* * *

A.F.L.'s top leadership participated more strongly in this campaign than

in any previous election. They hailed Daley as a union member (he maintains his membership in the bakery drivers union) and as a politician who understands the problems of working people. However, because of some factional differences in the Chicago Federation of Labor, the A.F.L.'s election activity suffered in some serious respects.

A citywide A.F.L. Committee for Daley was set up with headquarters in three communities and in the downtown area. But this committee did not encourage rank-and-file participation. On the contrary, this top-level committee substituted for Labor's League for Political Education, which was put on the shelf for the duration of the campaign. Evidence here was the resistance of some key A.F.L. leaders to the further building of L.L.P.E. as an independent body based on participation of the membership.

The bureaucracy preferred a setup which could make a quick endorsement of the Democratic ticket, conduct an uncritical campaign as an extension of Democratic Party activities in the labor movement, rely on radio, newspaper ads, mailings and local meetings to publicize the candidates and simply inform the rank-and-file as to who were the labor-endorsed candidates.

In this respect, the A.F.L.'s political work took a backward step from its work in the 1954 congressional elections. At that time L.L.P.E. congressional district committees were

organized, they concentrated on precinct activity in several districts and worked together with C.I.O. and other independent groups to tip the scales in several congressional contests. As a result of this campaign L.L.P.E. is in moth balls and the independent apparatus of labor is thereby weakened.

In spite of the bureaucratic set-up of the A.F.L. Committee for Daley this spring and the failure to conduct a more independent campaign, the political work of the A.F.L. did contribute materially to the Democratic Party's victory. The publicity job done by the A.F.L. was fairly extensive and the special rallies by a number of locals and district councils were very helpful. A few locals, in fact, did an outstanding job in helping to spell out the issues through their own election material and in special mailings to the membership. There is no doubt that the members knew where their unions stood and union-conscious members responded accordingly. But, many other union members did not see any great issues at stake in the election and even failed to register or to vote.

The A.F.L.'s campaign experiences are now the basis for a number of discussions among union leaders on the character of political action by labor.

It is clear, however, that progressives and other independent-minded union forces will need to take the initiative to help implement the oft-decreed program to build L.L.P.E.

as labor's independent political apparatus. For, if greater independent activity in the fight for labor's program is to be realized, there must be an extensive network of political activity to involve the membership on a local union, shop and community level.

C.I.O. activity in the municipal campaign was carried on mainly through its Political Action Committee apparatus. Unlike the A.F.L., C.I.O. raised funds for its own independent campaign, and not for the purpose of turning money over to the Democratic Party. C.I.O.-P.A.C. headquarters were set up in 12 areas and at least 300 of Chicago's 4,157³⁸ precincts were thoroughly canvassed by C.I.O. members using union literature. While C.I.O.-P.A.C. was not visibly strengthened and extended, C.I.O. stressed the need to build labor's own apparatus even as many of its members worked through the Democratic Party.

Unfortunately, factional differences between the officials of steel and other C.I.O. unions hindered a united approach to activity in the course of the campaign. These frictions have developed in a number of forms over the past two years, seriously threatening the unity of the county and state C.I.O. In the election campaign, the problems arose largely because the steel union leadership, which is the dominant force in C.I.O. in Chicago, takes a position of minimizing labor's independent role and of operating as an adjunct of

the Democratic Party. This was particularly harmful during the primary race when C.I.O. and all of labor took a hands-off stand on the matter of aldermanic candidates. C.I.O. thwarted a move by some trade unionists to challenge certain machine hacks by a decision not to endorse any candidates for the City Council.

Despite these serious weaknesses a number of C.I.O. local unions, and an important number of C.I.O. local leaders, notably in packing, auto and steel did an outstanding job in the mayoralty contest and in some wards behind liberal and Negro aldermanic candidates.

• • •

An important result of the Chicago election was the emergence of the Negro people as a more conscious and unified political force. The Negro population in the city is now estimated at nearly 650,000 or about 17% of the total. The impact of the Negro vote was never more evident than in the recent campaign.

It was the Negro community which gave most vigorous expression to the issues in the election. Even before the organization choices were being considered, the Negro community raised the slogan, "Kennelly must go!" They highlighted the need to develop an all-out joint struggle to defeat Chicago's racist and anti-labor mayor.

What were the factors that led to the strengthening of the Negro

people as an electoral force in Chicago?

1. The long continued outrage of Trumbull Park Homes brought to a head the resentment of the Negro people against the failure of public officials to deal with mob violence. Trumbull Park symbolized the most brutal pattern of racism which has developed in Northern cities in the post war years. The center of the outbreak here was a government-owned and city-administered housing project—and this tended to heighten the political implications of this struggle. The resentment of the Negro people was directed against Mayor Kennelly and also against the Republican state and federal administrations.

2. The Negro people registered their reaction to increasing exploitation of many types. The victimizing of Negro shoppers and tenants, the development of old and new swindles and economic discrimination brought a strong reaction. This was also the period of widespread layoffs in the Negro community.

While some of these grievances became direct factors in the city elections, there was considerable ferment developed around a city and state legislative program on these issues. During the campaign, the N.A.A.C.P. formulated a six-point program which called for a state F.E.P.C., curbs on discrimination in housing, hospitals, schools, public places and in insurance rates.

The mayoralty candidates were

compelled to take recognition of this legislative program and to speak on these issues. The N.A.A.C.P. held a city-wide mass meeting on the six-point program at which mayoralty candidates and state representatives in attendance were pressed to give their position on the issues. Several Democratic ward rallies in the Negro community stressed the issue of Trumbull Park Homes and housing generally.

Undoubtedly, some of the factors that influenced the Negro vote against Merriam in the final election were the actions of Republican Gov. Stratton during the campaign in cutting relief funds and in denying that there was any need for a state F.E.P.C.

3. The attempt of Mayor Kennelly to make political capital out of racist attacks backfired. Kennelly was swamped in the vote of the Negro communities in the primary election. And the chauvinist attacks taken over by Merriam in the general elections also proved his undoing.

The slanders made by Kennelly and the G.O.P. candidate were that the Negro voters were puppets manipulated by Negro Democratic Congressman William L. Dawson, that the "Dawson machine" was trying to take over the city government, and that the Negro community was a chief source of crime and corruption.

These attacks fanned the resentment of the Negro voters against

Kennelly and Merriam. Instead of driving a wedge between the Negro people and "the Dawson machine," the attacks served to draw the Negro people even closer to the Democratic Party. It was this resentment that led to the defeat of the widely known and highly respected G.O.P. Alderman Archibald Carey who lost in his ward to another Negro, Democrat Ralph Metcalfe.

At the same time, the Kennelly-Merriam appeals to racial prejudice failed to achieve the desired effect among white voters largely because of the role of the labor movement in the campaign.

The growing awareness by the Negro people of the issues at stake in the election led to an increase in Negro representation in the 50-man City Council. Two additional Negroes were elected making a total of five Negro aldermen, all Democrats, in that body. While this is an important gain there are three other wards where Negroes are in the great majority but where white aldermen represent the area.

The potential of the Negro vote and the struggle for Negro representation has not yet been fully realized. In fact, while there was a slight proportional increase of the Negro vote in the city elections as compared with last November, there is still a lower percentage vote in the Negro communities as compared with the rest of the city. Despite the increased Negro population, there has been a continuing drop in registration re-

flected mainly in the Negro communities.

It is true that large numbers of Negro people are fed up with both parties, and they do not see the people's movement unfolding the kind of struggle for Negro rights that would be affected by the outcome of a particular election. There is also the fact that many Southerners, at least 20,000 a year, are coming to Chicago and they have not been integrated economically or politically. And the serious housing crisis keeps many Negroes from establishing permanent residence in time to register and vote.

The problem of registration is a major matter. In Chicago over 100,000 votes from among the Negro people could be added to the people's coalition in 1956 if the matter is given early and systematic political attention.

* * *

A series of divisive factors, well exploited by the Republicans, threatened to shatter the labor-Negro-liberal electoral alliance which had been developing more strongly and effectively up until the time of the city elections.

What were some of these factors?

1. The tendency to set aside an estimate of the Republican Party as the preferred party of Big Business, to concentrate on the individual G.O.P. candidate and to take him and his platform at face value, to discount the main influence in the Republican Party and the fact that

the G.O.P. takes over when the "liberal" standard-bearer wins.

2. The failure to see issues, movements and the unity of the people's forces as decisive. Instead, many liberals focused attention on the candidates as individuals regardless of their relationship to the two parties, and the aims of their backers, and the consequences of splitting the coalition forces.

3. The tendency to focus on the shortcomings of the Democratic Party in such a one-sided way as to conceal the danger of G.O.P. reaction and to discount the possibility of winning concessions from a Democratic administration through struggle.

These factors were all present in the Chicago elections in such a way as to feed Republican reaction and its forceful bid for power.

Significantly, the leading forces of the people's coalition, namely labor and the Negro people, refused to chase any of these will-o'-wisps.

However, many of the liberals, middle class and professional groupings who have been part of the coalition did become diverted. Some of these traditional New Deal liberals failed to see the national implications of a local Republican victory or the long-term threat to the labor-Negro-liberal alliance. The extent of the confusion and the lack of a united people's campaign is seen by the crisis which developed in the Independent Voters of Illinois.

I.V.I. is well organized and highly

active in middle class communities in the city. It has a precinct apparatus which is experienced in getting out the vote. Last November I.V.I. even sparked the joint activity with A.F.L. and C.I.O. in several communities and raised the level of independent political activity.

This year, large numbers of liberals separated themselves from work with the main sections of the people's movement because of the split over Merriam's candidacy. The intellectuals and liberals who make up the main base of I.V.I. responded strongly to Merriam's slogans of ending machine politics and giving Chicago good and efficient government.

An executive Board majority of I.V.I. endorsed Merriam but the organization was divided. While the main effort was thrown behind the G.O.P. candidate, a sizable minority, including some top leaders, backed the candidacy of Richard J. Daley.

Later in the campaign, when the thinness of Merriam's liberal pretensions became more apparent, some of these straying elements returned to work with other forces behind the Democratic candidates. It was the staunch position taken by labor and the Negro people which won back many liberals and restored a great measure of unity in the campaign to defeat the aims of reaction.

The positive role of the middle class and liberal forces was also strengthened through an organiza-

tion in support of the Democratic ticket which operated independently of the Democratic Party. Known as the Volunteers for Daley, this organization undertook to win support particularly in non-labor circles. It made its main appeal the need to defeat reaction as represented by the Republican Party. It pointed out that the issues in the Chicago election were related to the national struggle against Big Business reaction and the forces behind Merriam were the same as those behind the Eisenhower administration and the McCarthys. The five ward Volunteer organizations activated in the city enlisted wide support among many who had, earlier in the campaign, indicated support for Merriam because they believed he would put an end to crime and corruption. More than any group, outside of the Left, Volunteers for Daley placed the main issues in clear focus and helped to sweep aside and to expose the demagoguery of the Republican "liberal" new look.

A dangerous diversion appeared in the Democratic primary campaign through the candidacy of Benjamin A. Adamowski, a maverick Democratic politician with strong connections mainly among Chicago's large Polish population.

The primary race was largely a contest between Daley and Mayor Kennelly, who decided to make a bitter fight for nomination even after he had been officially dumped by the Democratic organization at the in-

sistence of labor and its allies.

To some well-meaning liberals and progressives, Adamowski looked like a good "independent" candidate to support, even though it was generally conceded that he could not win in a three-way race.

The main forces of the people's coalition were supporting Daley in the primary, with extreme reaction backing Kennelly. Thus, the objective effect of Adamowski's candidacy was only to split the Daley vote and to increase the threat of a victory by Kennelly in the primary. Here again, it was only the staunch support of labor and the Negro people, which was not diverted by the Adamowski candidacy, that prevented a Kennelly victory.

The lesson here is in the importance of viewing candidates from the standpoint of uniting the people's forces in the struggle against the main danger. While in some cases third candidates as independents can help to clarify the issues and lead to greater independent activity, in other cases, where the broad people's forces have already made a choice, it can prove to be diversionary and a splitting factor which could only aid reaction.

The third dangerous tendency arose largely because of the shortcomings of the Democratic Party as a political instrument of the people. This tendency reveals itself in almost every two-party contest today, and will remain a problem as long as the people continue to express

themselves through one of the old parties instead of through a party of their own.

The Democratic Party in Chicago brought these major political liabilities into the campaign: (a) its long-time relations with some of the Big Business forces of extreme reaction; (b) its reputation as an entrenched machine which has connived in graft, crime and vice over the 24 years it has held power; (c) its record especially during the last two terms of the Kennelly regime, during which anti-labor employers, bankers, and racist realtors played an even more dominant role in the city administration.

Is it any wonder that "Defeat the Machine!" became the ringing slogan of the G.O.P., echoed by many good-government forces who were persuaded that a "reform" candidate in the party out of power was the only alternative?

The reactionary and corrupt elements in the Democratic Party were strengthened in the post-war years because labor and its allies failed to develop their own independent positions and fight for their own program within and without the party. Had there been a strong independent political apparatus bringing pressure to bear on the Democratic Party, there need not have been a Mayor Kennelly and the liberal, New Deal Democrats would have the dominant leadership over the corrupt machine hacks.

In the course of the municipal

campaign, the Democratic machine maintained an arrogant attitude. Machine hacks chose aldermanic candidates in most wards because labor took itself out of these races. Where challenges were made with liberal candidates they did not have the united backing of even the people's forces who were backing the Democratic candidate for mayor.

The Democratic Party did not win a victory, as the press contends, because of the machine vote based on bribery, habit or unthinking allegiance by those who vote Democratic. While it is true that strong party

ward organizations help to turn out a bigger vote, the sentiment of voters based on a common area of agreement around issues determines the way in which most people vote. The election was carried by coalition forces and particularly by the workers and the Negro people who saw the hand of Big Business behind the Merriam candidacy. They voted for the Democratic ticket as the only practical alternative they could see. These forces, although cognizant of the corruption and reaction which pervades the Democratic machine, were convinced however, that a Republican victory would be no improvement. On the contrary, labor and its allies, because of their experience, believe they can win greater concessions with a Democratic administration.

The events since the April election have shown the need for strong independent pressures on the Demo-

cratic administration. For, in spite of the role of the people's coalition in the election, there are as yet few indications of any real gains in housing, schools, equal rights, transit, etc. In fact, Mayor Daley has responded to the pressure of business interests in championing an increased sales tax and in soft-peddaling the real needs of the people in the city.

During the course of the election campaign, Daley was compelled to improve and strengthen his program wherever there was an effective mass movement around issues.

There was a broad coalition organized to end the crisis of double-shift and overcrowded schools. It was united around a comprehensive program and pressure was brought to bear to commit the candidates to this program. Daley responded by supporting the demands put forward by the mass movement on the school crisis. He also reflected the pressure of the broad movement against the Broyles bills by condemning and pledging to work for the defeat of this McCarthyite legislation.

The weaknesses in Daley's program were a reflection of the level of struggle in the trade union and other mass organizations around certain issues.

Daley did pledge to appoint labor, Negro and women citizens to important posts. Since election, he has named Chicago Federation of Labor President William A. Lee as chairman of the Civil Service Commission. This is the first time that a

representative of labor has been named to a post of "cabinet" rank in the city administration.

Clearly, however, the people's movement in Chicago has not yet learned the lesson of following up an election victory with the organization and pressure to demand delivery on pledges and a responsiveness to the people's needs.

And, while the people's forces are not vigorously pressing for action, the Big Business forces who backed Merriam are exerting their influences and pressures on the new city administration. * * *

An important feature of the Chicago election was the complete absence of red-baiting. This came about because of the shellacking the McCarthyite candidates got last November and because both Democrats and Republicans were vying for the liberal vote. They realized that red-baiting was hardly the way to win support from people who are beginning to recognize that red-baiting is a reactionary weapon.

The Communist Party was active in the campaign as a factor of no small importance. The election showed that the Party can and did influence trends, issues and movements, working on the basis of a coalition policy for the defeat of reaction. Communists and other progressives were the first to show that the municipal election was not a purely local contest but part of the struggle against Big Business policies

and McCarthyism. Unfortunately, the progressive forces failed to do more than make a passing reference to the peace issue and show the relationship of Chicago's local problems to the fight for peace.

It is still true that as yet too few Communists participate in election campaigns. This was seen once again in the city contest. While the membership accepts the Party program as correct in general, it does not yet fully understand the application of this program in practice.

In this respect, the Illinois Party leadership did not sufficiently clarify the issue in the Chicago election and show the relationship of that particular campaign to the struggle for our objectives in 1956. Policy discussions failed to reach and mobilize all sections of the Party and the carrying through of political activity was relegated in the main to the specialized group of people doing electoral work. The elections were not seen in practice as a mass task which would lead to greater contact with people and could raise their understanding to a higher level.

Some Communists and progressives failed to participate in the elections because they were confused by the demagoguery of the Republicans and were themselves diverted into believing that the main issue at stake was "the destruction of the Democratic machine." Others were so isolated or so immersed in inner routine work that they never quite

found the "handles" to enable them to get into the campaign.

There was less political activity in the progressive unions as compared with last November. This is a result of the weakened position of some of these unions and the special problems they faced. But many progressives in the C.I.O. and A.F.L. also capitulated to difficulties when they came up against the confusion and top-level operation of the labor bureaucracy. They complained about the weaknesses of the Democratic candidate, Daley, but failed to see their own role in helping to build independent political strength to influence the selection of candidates and the determination of program.

A small number of progressives worked actively and made outstanding contributions. But a greater portion of Left and progressive forces sat out the election. This held back the development of greater political activity and limited the scope of the election victory.

With the city elections now past, there is a tendency in the Party to set aside political action until the 1956 campaign actually begins. This grows out of a concept that election activity is an end in itself. Support for a particular candidate which

leads to an electoral victory does not in itself mean a victory for the people's program. The election campaign must be seen as part of a struggle to bring greater unity of the people's forces, to raise the people's understanding of the issues involved and the need for struggle, and to put the forces of progress in a more favorable position to achieve the defeat of extreme reaction.

With the adjournment of Congress and the various state legislatures, a concerted effort must be made to strengthen the independent apparatus of the labor movement and its allies. Legislative and political action conferences on all possible levels need to be encouraged leading to the widest area of agreement on issues, candidates and campaign activity for 1956.

In Illinois, the primary election to decide major candidates for 1956 will be held next April. Candidates are already being groomed for key offices. If the people's movement is to make a bigger leap forward and deliver a major defeat to the Big Business administration and its pro-fascist, pro-war orientation, then a new and higher level of all-embracing political activity must now be unfolded.

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